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THE PATHWAY OF ADVENTURE

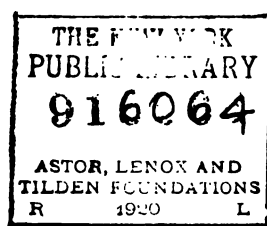
By ROSS TYRRELL



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THE PATHWAY OF ADVENTURE

CHAPTER I

ALONG THE LAKE SHORE

Stuart Wayne had taken a day from work in which to celebrate his good fortune. The early mail that morning had brought to his bachelor-apartments in the Cresenden Building a very substantial check—the first royalty returns on his new book—accompanied by an exceedingly pleasant letter written by his publishers in New York, stating that the work was enjoying an excellent sale.

As this was the first time he had succeeded in achieving any popular demand Wayne felt entitled to a brief vacation.

However, his methods were naturally quiet ones. He had not resided in Chicago for any great length of time, scarcely long enough to become habituated to the city, or to form a wide circle of acquaintances. Indeed, outside of certain professional friendships, and a few old-time chums, encountered by chance at the University Club, he scarcely felt that he really knew any one.

He had worked hard, supporting himself by the writing of special newspaper and magazine articles, and therefore found little time in which to cultivate the social side of life. To be sure, he had come to the city armed with several letters of introduction, of a kind to open numerous desirable doors, but thus far these had never been

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presented and, as the busy months passed, he had felt less and less desire to present them.

His work fascinated him and now, finally on the threshold of success, he was quite content to remain alone, his thoughts busied with reawakened ambition. Hence his present quiet celebration was entirely in accordance with the occasion.

He had lunched with Bob Carlton at the University. Bob was a good fellow, sympathetic and jolly; it had been a pleasure to talk over his plans, and voice his ambitions, with one possessing such practical business views, such an optimistic conception of life. Their conversation left him with a firmer grip on himself, and a clearer view of the future.

But Carlton had important business engagements, preventing long lingering at table. After his departure, Wayne wandered rather aimlessly about the rooms, seeking vainly some other acquaintance, until at last, lured by the resplendent beauty of the out-of-doors, he took a Cottage Grove Avenue open car, and journeyed southward.

By three o'clock, still alone, and with thoughts already beginning to concentrate upon a new plot, he reclined quite contentedly upon a bench in Jackson Park, gazing forth upon the wide expanse of Lake Michigan, practically oblivious to all that was going on about him.

A fresh breeze was blowing from the north, heavy enough to send the swell of waves dashing against the breakwater in white wreaths of spray, and to crown the more distant crests with lines of creamy foam. Against the far horizon two steamers were visible, both north-bound, black volumes of smoke pouring from their stacks, outlined in fantastic figures against the deep-blue of the

sky; while closer in toward the shore a number of small yachts were speeding about like white-winged birds.

There were a few fishermen on the pier, the park itself was bright with picnic-parties, while from a distance the noisy enthusiasm of an amateur ball-game rendered the air vocal. A continuous stream of humanity poured up and down the high stone steps leading to the doors of the German Restaurant, while along the broad driveway skirting the shore, passed and repassed a continuous procession of motors. Only the long cement walk appeared partially deserted, avoided by pedestrians because of the strong wind, and the occasional bursts of spray drenching its surface.

For some time he sat there, contrasting the different types that passed him by, but finally becoming restless he rose abruptly and whistled sharply to the driver of a passing cab. The equipage ground to a stop, and its pilot, with amazing dexterity considering the crowded boulevard, had the cab beside Wayne in less than half a minute. The author stepped in.

"Where to?" the driver demanded.

"Just drive," Wayne told him, "I'm out for air and plenty of it."

The other nodded, the gears clattered, and slowly along the blue water-front the cab began to move northward. Lolling back on the cushions, Wayne enjoyed it thoroughly; the sight of young girls, fresh-skinned and supple, driving their own machines; elderly business men bound for the links, tourist parties wearing out-of-date clothes and with northern Michigan stamped on their faces clattering by in wheezy cars; soldiers and sailors walking with their sweethearts near the spray-lashed quay.

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Not a vehicle that passed or its occupants escaped the professional momentary scrutiny in which he had trained himself and which had become an almost unconscious habit.

He had been riding for perhaps ten minutes when he became aware of another taxicab, a somber black one with mud on its wheel-guards, drawing abreast of his own. Presently it was alongside, and Wayne, turning professional eyes on its occupants, was immediately startled by the contrast between them.

In a flash he saw that the man was unusually swarthy of complexion, with coal-black hair and brows that overhung deepset, crafty eyes. More startling still was the long, fierce mustache standing rapier-like above the thick, sensuous mouth, from one side of which, extending half-way across the thin cheek, was a jagged scar.

"Military-looking brigand," was Wayne's mental judgment. "Either Italian or Mexican."

The cab drew a little ahead now, and he could obtain a better view of the other occupant—a girl of not more than twenty, of fresh and surprising attractiveness. Her figure, though slender, was full and rounded and superbly set off by a trim-fitting suit. The perfect oval of her face, shaded by a small turban, was framed by thin-spun hair as golden as the sun itself, and in his momentary examination Wayne judged that her eyes were gray.

The contrast between the two was so amazing that his speculation as to what interests they had in common was obvious. Neither spoke to the other, and he noticed that the girl sat as far away as possible from her companion.

Apparently they had no immediate mission, for the

cab, guided by a nondescript chauffeur, was traveling as slowly and as aimlessly as his own, and Wayne guessed that they, like himself, were "out for air."

He was about to dismiss them from his mind and turn away when, with a mild start, he realized that his eyes were looking full and directly into those of the girl. For just an instant were they thus, and in that instant Wayne caught a flash of communication. A woman would have called it intuition; a mystic, second sight; a newspaperman a "hunch."

But the message was undeniable, and it was a message of personal appeal.

And now that his interest was aroused, the other cab, perversely enough, began to draw away. Instinctively, as it advanced, Wayne looked for its license-number, but the plate was so covered with mud that the numerals were not to be distinguished. Oh, well, it did not matter, and as the distance between the two cars lengthened Wayne found his interest waning.

"Too much imagination," he thought, laughing to himself.

Upon sober reflection it did seem a bit too romantic to suppose that an unknown girl, to all appearances well-to-do and perfectly able to take care of herself, should be signaling to him for any reason whatever. Doubtless her sinister-looking companion was an Italian officer honorably discharged for wounds and on a visit to Chicago, and the girl, if not actually married to him, then related by marriage.

So, with this casual explanation Wayne managed to dismiss from his mind everything about the pair except that the girl's face was one to fascinate. The next time he looked ahead the other cab was nowhere to be seen.

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The afternoon was beginning to ebb, and Wayne, realizing that he must attend to some matters at his apartments before dinner-time, gave an order to the driver and in another moment found himself again headed south. Now the car appeared to be giving trouble, even at this slow pace, for occasional sputtering noises came from beneath the hood.

"She isn't behaving well, is she?" Wayne ventured.

"Naw," sourly replied the chauffeur, "it's the gas. More 'n half water and one-fourth kerosene. It takes a good Lizzie to keep goin' on it."

"Well, stick it out. I haven't far to travel."

The author laughed as he settled back on the cushions again.

The car, after a few minutes, seemed to perform more ably and gathered speed. One by one the blocks slid by until again the German Building loomed up ahead. Wayne was about to order the driver to turn west, in which direction his apartments lay, when suddenly, not forty feet ahead of him, as if dropped there from the Heavens themselves, appeared the other car with the golden-haired girl and her swarthy companion. All his dormant interest and speculation were aroused anew and he laughed amusedly.

"Coincidence," he said to himself. "If I had wanted to trace that car I couldn't have done it in a million years."

From his point of vantage he scrutinized the two ahead of him, so turned that their profiles were visible. Certainly the girl was attractive, and equally as certainly was the man repellent. Wayne did not know why, but instinctively he mistrusted him. They were evidently exchanging short opinions now, and he saw that the girl

was still seated as far away as possible from the military-looking fellow.

Suddenly, as though conscious of Wayne's scrutiny, she turned her face and looked back, and again after the first start of surprise in her eyes Wayne caught the vague message of appeal. Only this time it was more definite and the glance was longer. For perhaps five seconds their eyes held each other, and then the girl abruptly turned away.

Wayne's heart beat faster. Was he after all on the trail of an incident that might later be worked into a novel? Undeniably the girl had faced him deliberately, and undeniably, too, there had been purpose in her act.

At any rate, the monotony of the summer afternoon was being broken and it would do no harm to keep her in view.

The cabs still preserved the same distance between them, but in another moment Wayne's began to sputter and dropped back until the intervening space amounted to nearly a hundred feet. The girl ahead now seemed to become suddenly animated, and with one hand frequently called her companion's attention to various points of interest to the right. With a thrill Wayne realized that her free arm was stealthily attempting to fall outside the tonneau without arousing the swarthy man's attention.

Inch by inch it made its way, and when at last it was free Wayne saw clutched guardedly in the small, well-shaped hand a small leather note-book.

Now he knew! The girl was attempting to communicate with him! His "hunch" had been correct!

What her aim was did not matter just then. And as his eyes were glued to the girl's clenched hand he saw

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the fingers quickly relax and drop the note-book in the very path of his car.

His face hot with excitement, Wayne leaned forward "Stop here, just a moment," he commanded.

Obediently, the cab drew up to the curb. It was but a matter of a moment to get out, pick up the note-book and climb into the cab again:

"Stay fifty feet behind that cab ahead; the black one with the mud all over it," he commanded as he again took his seat on the cushions. Then as the car started in motion again Wayne took up examination of the note-book.

It was a tiny enough thing, one such as a woman carries in her hand-bag to jot down everything from a club woman's telephone number to the latest recipes for tomato-soup. Its binding was plain morocco without distinguishing marks. With nervous fingers Wayne thumbed the pages, looking up now and then to make certain that the cab did not get out of range.

Thumbing the pages the more undecided he became for apparently every page in the book was blank. Had the girl merely been making a fool of him? Had she thought him a bumptious young upstart with an eye to flirtations and thrown the note-book away for no other reason than to take a fall out of his conceit and have the laugh on him?

Yet he could not bring himself to believe that and painstakingly, he began at the front of the book and carefully went over each leaf. Toward the back he came upon two pages that had been folded over.

"Maybe—" he began, and eagerly flattened them out. He stopped short and his fingers tightened on the page.

There was a message!

Bending closer he examined the writing. It was in a girlish hand, apparently written in haste and with the stub of a pencil. From the first sentence to the last it gripped his interest as indeed it would have gripped the interest of any man with a streak of imagination, for this was what Wayne read:

TO THE GENTLEMAN WHO MAY READ THIS:

I do not know the date, but I have been in this house for three weeks. I do not even know where the house is, only that it is somewhere in Chicago, and on a street called "Calvert." It is, or, rather, was painted brown, and stands on a lot by itself, surrounded by a picket-fence in bad repair. It is a large, square, wooden house, two stories and a basement. I am held here a prisoner by two men and a woman. There may be others, as I have heard strange voices speak, but I have seen only these three. Two of them brought me here from Mexico, and I think their object is to rob me of a fortune left by my father. I am not yet of age, and do not wholly understand. I write this appealing to you for help. To-morrow, I am told, I shall be taken out for a motor-ride, and my only hope is that I may then be able to place this note in the hands of some person who will respond. May God guide me. Do not notify the police, as that would be useless. If you will come to the third window of the annex at midnight, I can tell you what to do; but dare not explain here. I pray this may fall into the hands of a brave man.

Pleadingly,
Z. G.

Again and again he ran through it, but yet he could not decide its purport. On its face the note was sincere enough—truth and earnestness seemed to pop out of every line—but scribbled notes dropped by bewitching young ladies from sinister black taxicabs were things for the movies, not for real life.

Yet here in an unromantic city apparently, romance

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was afoot or else he was being made a fearful chump of. At any rate, it would do no harm to follow the thing, at least temporarily, for the mere adventure of it; and still undecided as to whether to take the note seriously or not, he snapped the book shut, putting it carefully in his waistcoat-pocket. Then he looked ahead.

The girl's cab was increasing its speed, and as he watched it he saw her turn guardedly again and throw him an inquiring glance. He knew what she was asking, and nodded his head affirmatively to show her he had received the note.

Leaning ahead, he spoke to the driver:

"Can't you get more speed? They're drawing away from us."

"It's that blamed gas!" the other replied. "I'll do my best."

The cab ahead was hitting up a fair clip now, close to thirty, and Wayne's vehicle, through the driver's heroic efforts, managed to stay a rod or two behind. It was the author's idea to follow the cab to its destination, wait his opportunity, and scrape from the license-plate its cargo of mud and learn the number, after which it would be an easy matter to trace the owner.

This plan he was destined never to carry out, for the engine began to sputter again, back-fired, snorted, and finally hit on only two cylinders. Excited and disgusted, Wayne saw the girl's cab sliding away along the ribbon of the boulevard while he fell behind, unable to help himself. In a moment he had made his decision.

"Here! Take this," he yelled to the driver, tossing him a five-dollar bill as the car came to a stop. "You don't deserve it, though!"

"I'm sorry, boss—" the chauffeur began, but his words

fell on the empty air, for Wayne had fled and was already hopping aboard another taxi.

"South!" he commanded his new driver, "and fast!"

The taxi leaped ahead, regardless of the crowded traffic. Through the windows Wayne peered anxiously for a sight of the fugitive car. To stand tiptoe on the threshold of adventure and then have the door slammed in one's face was irritating, to say the least, and he cajoled the driver to do his best.

One block, two blocks, three, six, ten. And still no trace. Wayne reasoned that going at the rate they were they would have passed the car—unless it had turned west.

It would be useless to continue patrolling the boulevards in that case, and disgust, chagrin, and disappointment mingled into one blue murk, he ordered the car north again. At Sixtieth Street he directed it westward, along which course it proceeded until it came to the quiet curb of the Cressenden, where it stopped and let out one of the most out-of-sorts young authors in all the American writing fraternity.

CHAPTER II

A VENTURESOME RESOLUTION

After letting himself into his apartments in the Cresenden, Wayne immediately set about recasting the plot of an unsold short story. Ordinarily, when he had a task to do, the author could empty his mind of the day's odds and ends and apply it entirely to the matter at hand, but to-night he found this virtue missing; try as he did to straighten out plot, incident, and climax by the light of his writing-lamp, he failed miserably because thoughts of the girl and the day's strange occurrence came leaping into his mind like bold, unbidden guests.

Finally, too irritated to continue, he gave it up, and drawing from his pocket the morocco note-book, opened it, spread it out on the table, and for the tenth time reread the girl's message of appeal. Then pushing the book aside he lay back in the chair, stretched out his legs and looked fixedly at the ceiling, his mind a chaos of speculation.

There were at least three possible explanations for the sending of the note. First, since the girl was young, she might have been frivolous and vulgar enough to stoop to a silly boulevard flirtation; second, she might have been mildly demented and suffering from the delusion that she was being held captive—one of those numerous individuals upon whom Wayne had chanced often in his newspaper career; and, lastly, she might

have been exactly what the note indicated she was—a perfectly normal young woman gripped in the clutch of circumstance and actually in need of help in extricating herself from an unpleasant and possibly dangerous situation.

Judicially Wayne began to consider each possibility. After some reflection he decided that the affair could not have been a common flirtation; in her glances there had been nothing of boldness, nothing of the coquette, nothing of guile, only a mute appeal; and as he recalled the youthful dignity and character of her face she did not fit into any such vulgar picture.

Pursuing the second supposition, he was by no means as certain. Girls and men to all appearances as sane as the sanest frequently labored under mild delusions, and from memory he called several instances that corroborated this reasoning. The girl might be one of these. In case she were, it would account for the presence of the dark-looking companion, who might be either physician or guardian.

And yet, as he reviewed her deliberate actions and remembered the clear gray of her eyes and the poise that he saw there, he was as loath to classify her among the insane as he was to condemn her as a flirt.

To the last premise he devoted more time and thought. Assuming that the girl was a normal young woman in distress, why had she not seized her opportunity and leaped from the cab instead of trusting to such a melodramatic effect as a hastily scribbled note which, falling into the hands of an utter stranger, might have failed signally in its mission?

And what was her relationship to the dark-skinned man? On second thought it was absurd to suppose that

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a girl, patently both well-bred and intellectual, should choose for a companion such an atrocious fellow, marked as he was with the over-indulgences of life. His first half-theory that she might in some way be related to him was rejected.

He must then be considered in the light of a guardian or, worse still, a crook. Immediately he thought of abduction and blackmail. For all he knew the girl might be rich, and held for one reason or another by this man. Perhaps in sending the note she had taken the only means at her command to inform others of her predicament. Perhaps she had been on her way to a hiding-place when the message was sent.

Wayne recalled the stealthy deliberation by which she had managed to dispatch it, and this, among other minor considerations, decided him that the appeal was an honest one. The note itself, its general tone, its appearance of having been hurriedly written and its plea both direct and honest, yet freighted with mystery, corroborated his belief.

"It *must* be on the level," he muttered as he rose and began pacing the floor.

It had been written out of fear in heart. Of that he was certain. Further, she had taken a desperate chance in dropping it from the cab in the hope that it would fall into the hands of one who would both understand and be courageous. As to the man with the black mustache, Wayne, recalling the ferretlike, glittering eyes, the cruel mouth, the talonlike hands, felt that whatever his interest in the young woman was it would bring her no good.

And strangely enough he felt a burning anger toward the fellow.

But why had she signed herself "Z. G."? Why had she not given him at least her name as a clew to work on? That would have relieved the note of some of its melodrama.

Not that he any longer doubted the sincerity of the message, for experience had taught him that even in the commonplaces of everyday life there is sometimes melodrama of the most marked variety.

Not a real working clew on which to proceed! Again he cursed the balky engine which, that afternoon, had destroyed his chances of following the girl's cab and finding out its license-number. With this one bit of evidence in hand he felt sure that he would have been able to proceed far enough within a few hours to determine whether the whole affair was one to be taken seriously or as some atrocious farce.

He walked the room restlessly, the note lying open on his desk, his glance seeking it every time he turned. What should he do? What steps ought he to take?

The answer was not an easy one. The young man was no adventurer; his life heretofore had been rather ordinary and commonplace, although his long newspaper training had brought with it self-reliance, and a knowledge that truth is often stranger than fiction.

If he had not seen her, if he had not felt the charm of her presence and read the appeal in her eyes, he might even now have dismissed the whole matter with a cynical laugh.

But under the circumstances this was impossible. She positively had called to him, and he felt that he would prove himself a cur if he failed to respond.

But how? Should he go alone? Surely there would be no great risk assumed in merely searching for and

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locating the house or even in endeavoring thus to obtain conversation with the girl. In such an attempt he would run no greater peril than he had often assumed in tracing down some sensational newspaper story.

It was scarcely probable she would have suggested his coming, unless she deemed it reasonably safe. For her own sake she must naturally feel assured as to that. And there must be a reason why she hesitated to inform the police—the conspirators might be in league with them; or, she had been led to believe so.

He thought over the list of his acquaintances in the city, but it was only at the name of Bob Carlton that he hesitated. None of the others would do. In the first place, he did not know them sufficiently well.

But Bob might answer, for he was a fellow who rather enjoyed risking his neck in any unbelievable way, and besides could be trusted to hold his tongue. Wayne picked up the telephone-receiver, and called a number.

"Yes, central, Lakeside, 4463, please—hello, are these Mr. Carlton's apartments? They are? What is that?—oh, yes, you are his valet. To Lake Forest for the week's end. Why, I was with him at lunch; yes, this is Stuart Wayne. Oh, Blatchford took him home with him—I see; and he will not be in the city again until Tuesday? No, I'll not disturb him; that's all."

He hung up, and sat there in silence, his chin cupped in his hand, thinking the situation all over again. He was disappointed about Bob, yet somehow the disappointment only served to strengthen his own resolve.

It made no great amount of difference, this failure to enlist Carlton; he really had no intention of essaying any more than scouting around a bit at first anyway. Later, if needed, he could call upon some friend for as-

sistance; but likely enough the whole affair would prove to be a farce of some kind. If it did so develop he preferred being the sole victim.

Even as he turned this conception over in his mind his idle fingers had, almost unconsciously, picked up a pencil and began sketching a face on a blank sheet of copy-paper. He stared now in surprise at the result, and then burst into a laugh—it was a rude, vivid outline of the girl's face, exactly as it clung tenaciously to his memory—the rounded throat and chin, the rebellious strands of blond hair, the wide-open, questioning eyes.

The laugh ceased as he looked at the sketch; somehow the face pleaded with him, pictured an appeal. His eyes hardened into purpose, and his clenched hand struck the top of the desk.

"I'll do it!" he exclaimed to himself in final decision. "What's the odds? There may be the genesis of a plot in this, if nothing more.

"Let me see—Calvert Street; Calvert? I never knew there was any such place in the city. The best thing for me to do is dine at the club, and then ask the doorman. If he doesn't know he can look it up."

The doorman had to look it up, confessing frankly that he had no recollection of the name; no more did the two or three chauffeurs within reach of the entrance; nor was it to be found later in the pages of the city directory.

By this time, however, the doorman himself had become interested in the quest, and called up the telephone office for information. Thus it was learned that what had formerly been known as Odell Place had lately been rechristened Calvert Street—did he know where that was? The door-man did, and he proceeded graphically to outline his knowledge to Wayne.

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"It's a way out southwest, sir," he explained. "I haven't been there for three or four years; an' can't say as I have any wish to go again."

"Not a very respectable neighborhood, you mean?"

"Oh, it's respectable enough, so far as I know, but almighty lonely. It wasn't never settled up much; the street ain't more than three or four blocks long—is it, Dan?"

"And I don't believe there's more than that number houses along it; all of 'em old places, gone to seed."

His eyes grew reminiscent.

"Why, come to think of it, one of 'em must have been the old Hartigan house—you've heard about him, haven't you, Mr. Wayne?"

The young man shook his head, but waited, anxious to learn all that he could regarding the neighborhood.

"I thought maybe you did, as you was a newspaper-man," resumed the doorman, not averse to hearing his own voice. "Well, when I was a kid that was all open prairie out there, except for this Hartigan place.

"He was a big gambler in those days, and kept a string of race-horses. He trained 'em out there; had a private track, an' us boys used to hike out to see 'em run.

"Hartigan was murdered there one night, an' then, not long after, his widow sold the place. I'd plumb forgot all about that affair for years."

"What sort of a looking house was it, Carney?"

"Big, square, wooden house; must have had fourteen or fifteen rooms in it. We thought it was a whale in them days. Hartigan kept it painted white while he lived there, but it is more than twenty years since he died."

"Who killed him?"

"Nobody ever know'd; he was found one morning with a knife in his heart. A gamblers' row, I reckon."

"Do you recall anything resembling an annex to this Hartigan place?"

"Yes," and Carney scratched his head thoughtfully. "Come to think of it, I guess there was, a sort of kitchen ell, built on at the rear, with an upper story, where the help slept. It strikes me this was added on later, as Hartigan had to employ more people out there with his horses. Us boys never hung around there much after Hartigan was killed, for everybody said the place was haunted.

"I never took much stock in that, Mr. Wayne, but nobody lived there for a long while, and it was almighty eery looking. The house sorter went to pieces, and the yard grew up into weeds.

• "Then, a little later, a gang of counterfeiters made their headquarters out there. Finally the Secret Service got after them, and there was a dickens of a fight in the front room—same place that they found Hartigan's body—and a man or two got hurt.

"Seems to me one of 'em died. After that you couldn't get a kid to go within a hundred yards of the house; and I don't know what's become of it."

"Except that it still stands, out there on Calvert Street?"

"Oh, it's probably there, all right. I saw it maybe three years ago, but don't think anybody was living in it then; the front windows was all boarded up.

"There was an awful lot of shrubbery between the house and the street, pretty near as dense as a woods. Gosh, sir, I wouldn't live there for a fortune."

"How do you get out to Calvert?"

"You wouldn't want to take a taxi?"

"No."

"Well, then, the best way would be a Madison car, as far as Western Avenue, and then transfer south. Go till you come to Caspar, and then walk west three blocks. That will bring you to Calvert.

"You are not liable to find any cement walks out there; and street lights ain't any too numerous. I'd take the trip in the daytime, if I was you."

"All right, Carney; thanks. I rather think so myself."

Wayne ate his dinner slowly, seated alone at a small table. There were a few familiar faces in the room, but none that he felt any desire to companion with at that time.

Strange as it may seem, Carney's description of the deserted Hartigan house, and its surroundings, only served to strengthen the younger man's resolution, and increase his faith in the truth of the girl's note. Everything appeared to coincide, and he no longer had doubt but what this old home of the murdered gambler was the place of her imprisonment.

It seemed peculiarly adapted to the purpose. It was isolated, avoided, a house long associated in the public mind with crime—an ideal spot for concealment. Perhaps in the entire city no other place could be found wherein conspirators might hide with such assurance of safety, with such certainty of avoiding the observation of the police.

He would in many ways prefer making his first visit by daylight, yet probably a trip there at night, under cover of darkness, would be the safer experiment.

Then the girl had pledged herself to watch for him,

and would be greatly disappointed if he failed to appear. She would naturally believe he lacked courage, and might not expect him again. Besides, it was altogether likely that she knew the best hour for an approach to the house; the particular time when his loitering about would be least likely to be observed.

He regretted not having brought a revolver with him; however, the weapon would scarcely be needed, as his only purpose at present was to attempt a cautious survey of the building from without, and, if conditions justified, communicate with the prisoner. Apparently there was no reason why he should encounter any one, or be required to defend himself from attack.

The adventure, as thus outlined in his mind, was, indeed, rather attractive, and he finished his meal in a spirit of cheerfulness, finally indulging in a glass of wine and a carefully selected cigar. Watching the smoke-wreaths, he smiled at discovering the girl's face revealed in memory, finding it even more alluring than ever.

He wondered what her name could be, concealed behind those unusual initials, Z. G. It was considerably after nine before he thought to glance at his watch, and hurriedly left the club.

The Western Avenue car, caught at the intersection of Madison Street, was well filled, and Wayne dropped into a rear seat, feeling no great interest in his fellow passengers. Many of these disembarked during the next few blocks, so that when they approached the more sparsely settled regions only a comparatively few remained aboard. The vacancies occurring finally permitted Wayne's attention to become attracted toward two men, seated together near the front end.

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The one next the aisle was apparently young, but built like a bull, his round head supported upon a short, thick neck, and his broad, heavy shoulders occupying at least two-thirds of the seat. Indeed, it had been the noticeable massiveness of the fellow which originally aroused interest; and it was not until his companion turned half-way around in an effort to peer out through the dark window that Wayne became suspicious of his identity.

Then he recognized him instantly as the same swarthy individual who had accompanied the girl that afternoon in her ride through Jackson Park.

CHAPTER III

FAITH BECOMES KNOWLEDGE

The fellow made no effort to glance behind him, apparently having no fear of being followed. He exchanged a few words with his heavily built companion, and the latter flattened his nose against the glass of the window in an endeavor to see without. Some familiar landmark must have been perceived, for both men settled back in their seats, evidently satisfied that they were still some distance from their destination.

Wayne had no reason to imagine that the Mexican—for such he now believed the swarthy stranger to be—had observed him in the park, or that there was the slightest danger of his recognition. Yet such a possibility existed; the two strollers had passed his bench several times, and the man might, of course, retain a vague recollection of his features, enough to arouse suspicion if they were again to encounter each other on this West Side car.

The safer plan surely would be to keep entirely out of sight. Deciding on this course the young man slipped quietly from his place, retreating to join the conductor in the rear vestibule.

“Want to get off at Carlyle?” the latter asked, his hand on the bell-cord.

“No; I’m new down this way, and came out to ask a question or two. How far are we from Caspar?”

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"Something over a quarter of a mile; want to get off there?"

"The street this side; I've forgotten the name."

"Johnston; but there ain't no houses anywhere about there—the nearest is two blocks south. I don't believe I've put off no passengers at Johnston fer six months. Where was yer aimin' ter go to, may I ask?"

"Calvert; my friend told me I'd have no trouble if I walked straight down Johnston."

"Well, maybe yer won't; but mostly them that go there get off at Caspar—it's nearer. Do yer see them two guys ahead, second seat from the front? That's where they get off; they been ridin' with me now for about two weeks, pretty regular."

"Do they live on Calvert?"

"Sure thing. They come out on my car first time one afternoon, when they'd just got off the train, I guess, for they had quite a few grips along. There was four in the party—them two and a couple of women."

"One of the females was about thirty-five, not such a bad-looker, and dressed to kill, sorter stout built. The other struck me as bein' a young girl, but she had a heavy veil on, and I couldn't see her face. I've seen her since, though."

"You have? Does she ride with you often?"

"No, she ain't never been with me since till to-day. It was my first trip this afternoon. She and that dark guy up there got on at Madison—hopped out of a taxi and into the car just as I pulled the cord. They'd been riding around down-town, I guess, but didn't have no bundles."

"She was a mighty pretty girl, let me tell you, a real blonde, not one of yer peroxid make-believes."

"Gosh! But she did sure stack up white an' clean alongside that foreigner. I don't know just what to make of them two; they didn't hardly speak to each other all the way out, and when they did it wasn't in any language ever I heard before."

"Spanish, likely, or Italian; he looks like it."

"Maybe it was; all I know is 'twa'n't neither German nor Swede."

"And you say they got off at Caspar? What makes you think they live on Calvert?"

"'Cause that big-necked guy came back and asked me some questions that first trip. That's what interested me mostly. He wanted to know where was the old Hartigan house—"

"You mean Hartigan, the gambler? Did he used to live out this way?"

"He certainly did—but that was a long time ago. He was killed out here—you remember that, don't you? No; well, maybe that happened before your time. I wasn't much more than a boy then myself."

"There wasn't no streets, and no carline out here then; but the house is still standing, over on what they call Calvert now. Far as I know 'tain't been lived in much since, leastwise not since the police cleaned out 'Red' Dugan's gang what made it headquarters; but I guess this outfit must be stopping there now, from what little I got out of them. I never got to talk none with that dark fellow, and the big guy don't say much. If you ask him any questions he shuts up like a clam."

"Is the house furnished?"

"Left just as it was when old Hartigan croaked, they tell me. Somebody said it was sold shortly after, but nobody ever took possession, so maybe the deal fell

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through. The widow moved down-town, but she didn't live more than a year.

"They had one son, rather a wild one; a few years ago he was running a saloon dive somewhere in the Loop; then he got into trouble with the police and had to skip. That's the last I heard of him."

"Then this younger Hartigan still owns the property?"

"I guess so; he couldn't never sell it," cheerfully replied the conductor, evidently enjoying some one to talk with, "unless he unloaded it on a mortgage, and 'tain't likely any one would put up much on that kind of a deal.

"There ain't no value to real estate in this neighborhood. I bought a lot out here six years ago, and, blame me, if I can even give it away. Johnston is the next street, if you aim to get off there."

"All right; you needn't stop; I'm a railroad man—good night to you."

A small incandescent glowed at the corner, lighting dimly a small fraction of the street. Wayne swung off easily, however, and watched the rattling car disappear into the darkness beyond.

It was a gloomy spot enough in which he found himself, realized from a single, swift glance about. He could scarcely believe it possible that he was still well within the city limits. A bare expanse of unoccupied prairie extending in every direction, without so much as the outline of a house visible, nothing, indeed, but a slightly darker shadow at his right, marking a line of scraggly trees along one side of the street.

His best course appeared to be to follow the car-track, and he struck out in that direction, with eyes watchfully

fixed on the bobbing light of the car he had just left. It would stop at Caspar to discharge those two passengers, and it was his plan to permit them to disappear toward Calvert without their suspicioning any other presence. This was why he had leaped from the step at Johnston Street without asking the conductor to pull the cord. He felt confident the action had been accomplished without attracting any attention, and that he could now shadow the two with no great peril of discovery.

Wayne had reason to feel that his chance conversation with the loquacious conductor had been a most fortunate one. He had learned much of value, and knew better how to proceed; moreover, he was strengthened in his determination.

What he had been told not only served to corroborate the truth of the girl's letter, but had definitely narrowed his search to the old Hartigan house. Consequently his personal interest in the affair, as well as the solving of the mystery, was appreciably increased. He no longer had any intention of returning without learning more. His future actions were not to be based on mere idle curiosity, but would result in most careful investigation.

Already he was convinced that he had invaded the atmosphere of crime, and that there rested upon him a distinct duty to perform. This knowledge left him more wary and cautious, for the affair promised to prove a far more serious matter than he had anticipated, and might require the exercise of qualities other than a mere reckless bravado.

He sincerely regretted having ventured into such a neighborhood unarmed, and alone. Why, he had not even left a message behind, explaining his disappearance.

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If anything should happen to prevent his return no friend would have the faintest conception as to what had become of him—unless Carney might chance to recall his questioning at the club.

However, he would take no chances of that to-night. He determined to make no serious effort to communicate with the young woman; that would be too dangerous. She might think he had failed her; that her note of appeal had fallen into unworthy hands, but he could not help that.

She would learn the truth about his efforts later, and be equally thankful. The thing for him to do now—the only reasonable, safe thing—was to locate the house positively, and gain some information as to its surroundings. He could accomplish this without any particular peril; and then, to-morrow, he would get hold of Carlton, and they would decide together on the next step.

No, not Carlton, he was too rattle-headed—Dan Stiles would be a far better man for such a job. Wayne knew that he was connected in some way with the government's crime detection system, and this would be right in his line. Wayne wondered why he had not thought of Stiles before.

These thoughts flashed through his mind disconnectedly as he stumbled forward. The night was intensely black, the only lights being at the street intersections, where their feeble gleams were scarcely distinguishable. The only sound reaching him was the vanishing rattle of the street-car; the loneliness was intense and depressing. He distinguished the grinding of a brake as the car approached Caspar, and waited motionless, staring through the gloom ahead.

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In the dim blending of lights his eyes were barely able to make out the shapeless shadows of the two men as they descended the car-step and vanished into the surrounding darkness. Then the bell tinkled twice, and the car sped on.

Wayne waited where he was for a moment, breathlessly listening, endeavoring to assure himself as to the exact direction the men had taken. He heard one of them swear in English, following a muffled blow, as though an incautious foot had in the gloom encountered some obstacle—then all was silence. Clearly enough the two had vanished up the unseen road to the right.

Confident of this, Wayne moved over toward the bank, and began a cautious advance, keeping well hidden within its darker shadow. Except for the fact that a miserable incandescent sputtered at that point, emitting scarcely more radiance than a firefly, he never would have been aware of the presence of Caspar Street.

There were no fences, and when by sense of feeling alone, he succeeded in locating the road, a few traces of wheels were so completely obscured by grass as to render following them a most difficult undertaking. It had to be done, however, and he made the effort.

They led up a slight embankment, while beyond this the country ahead appeared open and flat. There were no lights to serve as guides, but he imagined that he saw a grove of trees, irregularly outlined against the slightly lighter sky. The two men must necessarily have gone this way, but were already so far in advance that no sound of their progress reached him.

Their knowledge of the route, which they had traversed on other nights equally dark, enabled them to proceed rapidly. The solemn, eery silence caused

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Wayne's heart to beat fiercely, yet only led to the hesitation of a moment.

He was too old in experience to be afraid of the dark, and now that he had ventured this far had no intention of retreating until he had learned more. He stood erect, and began advancing slowly, feeling his way through the darkness, seeking to trace the faint wheel-tracks, venturing only a step at a time.

The short grass under foot was slightly wet, as though from a heavy fall of dew, and he advanced so slowly and silently as to hear his own breathing. No sound from those before reached his ears; they must be further ahead than he had supposed, yet he dared not quicken his pace. All about was so black and formless that he had by this time lost every sense of direction, and could only blindly follow the faint wagon-tracks.

Yet each step served to define more clearly that ragged grove of trees to the left of the road. He became assured that it really was a patch of timber, could even trace its extent, and before he finally attained its black shadow, his searching eyes detected evidence of a rude fence. He was, however, compelled to turn aside to fully convince himself of this—feeling with his hand.

It was a mere remnant, originally picket, but these had largely disappeared, the stouter frame-work alone remaining, the supporting-posts sagging from rottenness. This reminder of better days bordered the road, while beyond it were a few well-grown trees, and a perfect tangle of underbrush.

There was no evidence of any house, however, nor a gleam of light showing the near presence of a dwelling. The black, silent wood only rendered the surroundings more somber and desolate. He pressed on along the line

of fence, seeking some opening, some semblance of a path.

Suddenly he stopped, clutching convulsively at the wooden rail beside him, and as instantly sinking low into the depth of shadow. There was some movement perceptible, although obscure and ill-defined, just in front.

He heard a muttered oath, a swift motion, a half-smothered exclamation, and the dull thud of a blow, followed by what sounded like the fall of a body.

There was an instant of intense silence, broken finally by a startled voice speaking in broken English.

"Vat vas eet you do, Cowan? Who you heet—vat?"

Some one laughed, a mere mumble between the teeth.

"Darned if I know, Don," grumbled a deep voice doubtfully. "A feller stepped out of the gate yere right inter me. I reckon he never heered us comin'. I just nat'rally poked him one, an' it muster been a knockout, fer he sure dropped sudden."

"He come by ze gate?"

"Yep; in the shadder o' the post yere. I didn't ask no questions, but just whaled away. Got a match? Let's have a look at the cuss."

"A match? No! Eet light up, an' be seen. Nevair! Vat ze man do here—hey? You zink he be alone?"

"How do I know?" disgustedly. "Maybe if I saw his face I could tell. What's the use o' bein' so scared, Don? Nobody knows enything 'bout us. Let's have a look at the fellow."

"Zat vas eet; nobody know; nobody best know. Vy you so sure nobody know—hey? Vat bring ze feller here in ze night? You anzer me zat. He come for ze walk? For ze night air?"

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"Bah, 'tis not ze truth. Somewhere zar is ze leak. I like eet not at all—no! Vat you zay ve do?"

"Why, lug the guy inside and have a look at him—we can't leave him lying here."

"You t'ink maybe he dead?"

The other rose up from his knees, a huge, shapeless figure.

"Dead? Naw! It was just a knockout. I got him square on the chin, by luck, but hit him with my fist.

"Come on, Don, and lay hold. I want'er glimpse the guy's looks. I know most o' the fly-cops in this town, an' what their graft is. When the feller comes to we'll give him the third degree."

"Ze vat, you zay?"

"Oh, a good turn-over; make him tell what brought him out here. I'll know how to make the guy talk."

"Vare ve take heem?"

"Any place inside; what's the dif'? He can't get out until we say so, can he? In another day or two we make our getaway."

"But," the other protested, "if ze man vas not alone? Vat zen? You vould reesk too much."

"Risk! We've got to risk. See here, Almerido, ain't I inter this yere job as deep as you be? Ain't I? Don't I know the stake we're playin' fer? An' whut it's goin' ter mean if we git caught afore the time is up? Don't I?

"Now listen—it's all right ter be cautious, just so long as you can be; but sometimes the other sorter thing pays best. We've been here a month under cover, layin' wires, an' gettin' ready. So far as we know nobody has suspicioned us, an' the police don't even know yet that

we are in this town. There ain't been nobody watchin' us—has there?"

"Eet is vat you say—si," admitted the Mexican as this direct question was flung at him. "Not till zis man come, I haf no fear."

"Exactly. Now we run into this guy snoopin' about in the dark. We don't know who he is; but it's a damn sight safer to hold him than to let him go. He'd talk now, wouldn't he, whatever his purpose was? Then we've got to shut him up.

"I tell you, Don, the feller's here alone; if he'd had had a partner we'd 'a' heard from him afore this. However, I'll beat these bushes, if that 'll make you feel any easier; but the first thing for us to do is git this guy under cover, and as soon as his senses return, pump his story out o' him.

"Once we know what brought him here, then we'll know what to do. That's good sense, ain't it?"

The other was silent, evidently impressed by the force of this argument, even if not wholly satisfied.

"What in thunder did I ever tie up with such a white-livered cuss for?" the big fellow growled in undisguised disgust. "How did your kind ever think up a scheme like this anyhow? You've been scared half to death at every shadder since we struck this town."

"Eet iss not my countree; I feel not et home here; I know not ze vays ov ze peoples," the Mexican apologized. "Ef eet be Mexico I lead; I tell you zen vat to do. Eet is not zat I fear—no; but ze peril of meestake, of ze wrong step. *Señor*, I fight; 'tis often I fight; no one call Juan Almerido ze coward."

"No, I reckon not; I heard all about you in El Paso.

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That's why I tied up with you on this job. Come on then; let's lug the fellow inside."

"You zink maybe he be a detective?"

"No, I don't. It is my hunch he is some nosy guy who has found out that some one is livin' in this house, and is just snoopin' round to see what's goin' on. He'd be a fine fly-cop to walk right into me like that.

"Take hold, will you? If we keep on arguin' here this buck will come to, and likely start another row—that's it, pick up his legs."

The two ill-defined figures faded entirely out of view, bearing their sagging burden, and Wayne could hear the diminishing sound of their feet shuffling along on what was apparently a cinder-path. As soon as he dared to venture he stole forward as far as the gate, and a moment later had slipped within the enclosure.

The path was easily located, but in advancing he chose to deaden his footsteps by walking on the short grass. The dense shadow of the tangled underbrush suddenly came to an end, revealing an open space beyond.

Ordinarily this would have seemed dark enough, but now appeared almost light to his eyes accustomed to that deeper gloom through which he had been creeping. Stooping low to the earth he was able to perceive a faint outline of the house, and the shapeless figures of the two men bearing their burden toward it.

CHAPTER IV

DRAWN ON BY FATE

If any doubt still lingered in Wayne's mind that he was upon the trail of a crime of some magnitude it vanished as he crouched there in the deep shadow of those bushes, watching the two men approach that silent house with their unconscious burden.

He had already heard enough, witnessed enough, to satisfy himself on this point. What the crime might be, its nature, and method of execution, remained unsolved; but that it was no common, ordinary affair was already sufficiently clear. Nor did he longer hesitate as to his duty.

His thought leaped from point to point swiftly—the girl prisoner with her pitiful appeal for aid; her vague explanation that this was the result of a conspiracy to rob her of a fortune; the statement that she had been brought to this house from Mexico; the choosing of such a spot for concealment, this abandoned residence of the murdered Hartigan, reputed to be haunted, as headquarters for the gang; their secrecy and fear of the police; Cowan's unknowing acknowledgment that the desperate scheme had originated in the brain of the Mexican, and that he had first become connected with it at El Paso—all these things combined to yield him a fresh view-point, a new conception of its importance.

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Yet in no way did these facts, even when woven together, solve the mystery. Who was the young woman? In what form was this property which these men plotted to secure? Was their scheme one of mere fraud, or did it contemplate even murder? What connecting link existed between Chicago and far-off Mexico?

Wayne rather prided himself on his swift judgment of men—his newspaper experience had given him an accurate insight into character, which in the past had seldom deceived him. He had seen these two, heard their voices, and now instinctively catalogued them.

To his mind the Mexican was far the more dangerous—a scheming, cold-blooded villain, treacherous and vindictive. The other—Cowan—was of a vastly different type, adventurous, and relying on brute strength; possessing, to be sure, a certain degree of low cunning, but with more faith in a blow than in words.

It was probable that this fellow had been picked up by Almerido because of his intimate knowledge of Chicago, and his acquaintance with the police. Probably he was responsible for their selection of this house in which to conceal themselves. Of the two he would be far more likely to do the strong-arm work, if anything of that nature was contemplated.

Wayne recalled the short, thick neck, the immense breadth of the man's shoulders, and the slight glimpse he had obtained in the car of the fellow's face. That he was very largely brute was sufficiently clear, while a strangely misshapen ear spoke eloquently of past experience in the prize-ring.

His fist blow must be a deadly one—no wonder the man he struck had gone down as though poleaxed. If he had landed right the chances were he would have

broken the fellow's neck; indeed it was not altogether impossible that he had.

With these reflections the full seriousness of his own position came to Wayne with renewed force—he knew now something of what he was pitted against. Manifestly it was to be no boys' play. Whatever these villains contemplated, it was of sufficient importance and danger to render them desperate and reckless in their methods.

They might not have deliberately planned murder, yet they would have no great hesitancy in committing it, if necessary to achieve their ends, or to prevent detection.

And he was there alone, unarmed, and had left behind no message as to where he had gone. His mysterious disappearance would leave scarcely a ripple. He knew he had been a fool to enter blindly on such a quest; it had been a mere quixotic attempt on his part to appear gallant and discover the truth or falsity of the girl's note.

He had had no other object in mind; her memory had spurred him into action against his calmer judgment. He had thought only of her—of the appeal in her eyes—and given no heed to consequences.

Indeed, until within the last half-hour, the affair had not appeared to him as a really serious one—as one involving any grave issues, or exposing him to any particular peril. He had thought of the girl as probably coerced by relatives, who were, perhaps, endeavoring to force her into some action which she did not desire to take—a mere family affair.

Quite possibly she had an entirely wrong view of the matter, and had become unduly excited and fearful. His one idea had been simply to go to her with words of

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comfort and advice; perhaps, if occasion warranted, even to offer his assistance in some way.

Beyond this he possessed no purpose of interfering; and he had been influenced to take this step only because of the peculiar interest she had aroused by her personal attraction.

The earliest actual suspicion that he was becoming deeply involved in a really serious affair—in the solution and baffling of a crime—came through his chance conversation with the loquacious street-car conductor, and his subsequent observation of these two men. Their appearance alone was sufficient to convince him, not only that they were capable of evil deeds, but also that they could have no possible family connections with the young woman whose frantic plea he had answered.

Moreover, their effort at concealment, the conversation between them that he had overheard, were proofs positive that their purposes were illegal, undoubtedly criminal. Almost without warning he found himself plunged into the maelstrom of some strange crime, the deep mystery of which he must attempt to solve, or else deliberately desert to her fate this helpless girl, who, in desperation, had turned to him, an unknown stranger, for assistance.

No thought of accepting this latter alternative once occurred to Wayne. Indeed, he was of a nature fascinated by danger, and inspired by such a demand upon courage. Even if he had never seen the girl her piteous appeal to his sense of chivalry would have led him to take action on her behalf; but he had seen her, had gained one glimpse into the depths of her eyes, and now that memory remained, fresh and inspiring, urging him forward with strange, compelling insistence.

He was not a man easily impressed, and had generally

felt, hitherto, rather indifferent toward the opposite sex. He could not now define exactly what it was which had so swiftly attracted him in this instance—but, nevertheless, he knew already that nothing in life would satisfy him as would a second meeting with this girl, who had come so suddenly and unexpectedly within his circle of existence.

Whoever she was, he must know her, serve her, prove to her the depth of his manhood. This was ordained of fate.

From where he crouched at the edge of the underbrush he could not perceive clearly all that was taking place against the black shadow of the distant house. The burden the two men carried must have been a heavy one, for once they paused, leaving the man's body lying upon the ground.

The Mexican, distinguishable even in that darkness because of his slender figure, remaining standing motionless, until Cowan, rather roughly, again urged him to the task. The three disappeared entirely on attaining the front steps, seeming to vanish mysteriously in the gloom.

Wayne, confident of being beyond observation, rose silently to his feet and bent forward in an effort to follow their movements, yet was unable to discern what had become of them. Surely they had not mounted the steps; nor had they rounded the corner of the house. He could not have failed to observe them in either case. The only explanation was a basement door, somewhere beneath the front entrance.

If this was the truth, then it must have opened silently, and into utter darkness; for there had been no sound perceptible, no click of a lock, or creaking of

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hinge, no rapping for admittance, nor had any sudden gleam of light flashed forth. The two men, bearing between them the apparently lifeless body, had simply melted away as completely as though they had sunk into the ground.

Assured, at last, that they were indeed gone, Wayne stole along the outer edge of the underbrush, keeping well under cover, until the entire front of the house became exposed to view, together with a large portion of one side.

It was a building of no mean dimensions, no doubt quite pretentious when erected in that sparsely settled neighborhood, but now plainly exhibiting, even under the mantle of darkness, the evidences of long neglect and decay. It was big, square and ugly, with a hip-roof, and an ell at the rear, rendered even more somber and desolate in appearance by dark-colored paint.

Whatever degree of wealth its original owners may have possessed they were certainly not endowed with any delicacy of taste, and the place represented utility rather than beauty or cheerfulness. While it might be commodious enough within, and conveniently arranged, without it resembled a huge barn, its only attempt at ornamentation being a rather fanciful veranda, extending entirely across the front.

It stood there, within that surrounding thicket of undergrowth, gloomy and silent, to all outward appearance completely deserted. Not a gleam of light stole forth from any window; nor was the slightest evidence that the place was inhabited visible.

If Wayne had not seen with his own eyes those two men disappear amid the shadows of the front steps he would have been convinced that the house was unoc-

cupied, and had been in that condition for years. In a star-ray he looked at the face of his watch and waited. Surely those within would not now long remain in darkness; they would desire to examine the injured man and ascertain the meaning of his presence; and besides, Cowan had expressed a determination to explore the yard.

But the minutes passed and nothing occurred—the windows exhibited no glow within; there was not the slightest sound of movement. This continued suspense was more than Wayne could bear.

Better to make a mistake than lie there long in inaction. At least he would attempt to assure himself that the injured man had really been taken within.

A line of neglected currant bushes, scraggly and growing into each other, furnished him with partial protection, and within their shadows he crept forward on hands and knees. Not until he was close in, almost at reaching distance, did he begin to comprehend why there was an absence of light—the basement windows were boarded up tightly, and those of the first floor thoroughly protected by strong wooden shutters, all carefully closed.

He could not determine the condition above, but from all appearances the entire house might be a blaze of light within, and yet from outside seem utterly deserted. However, these tightly closed shutters were equally a protection to his movements, and, indeed, even if some watcher chanced to be at an upper window, he was not likely to be detected in the shadow of the building.

He hesitated whether to investigate the back or front of the house first. The girl's note had intimated that she was confined in the annex, but Wayne felt constrained to determine definitely, before he sought com-

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munication with her, exactly what had become of Cowan and the Mexican. He had no reasonable assurance of being safe from discovery unless they were both within.

The suspicion that one, at least, might have remained without on watch, determined him upon making a cautious examination of the space beneath the front steps, where they had disappeared.

The broad veranda, elevated on brick piers, with a remnant of lattice work between, compelled a rather wide détour, but his passage was unhalting, and a thick growth of weeds served to shield his progress from observation. The steps leading down into the areaway were of wood, one being gone entirely and another badly rotted.

Once beneath the porch he found himself plunged into a darkness so intense as to be compelled to feel his way inch by inch with extended hands. It was a bricked-up passage, the floor and sides damp to the touch, and led to a rather wide door, opening directly into the basement.

While the door itself was of solid wood, there were narrow glass panels at either side; but as no light streamed through these Wayne concluded they must be heavily draped. Fearful of making a misstep, he waited breathlessly, listening for the faintest sound from within, but hearing nothing.

The gloomy silence and apparent desolation of the house added immeasurably to its horror. The knowledge that it was occupied; that somewhere, probably within a very few feet of where he stood, were human beings, criminals hiding from the law, men desperate enough to commit murder, not only rendered his presence pre-

carious, but brought to him a feeling of dread such as he had seldom felt.

He could feel his flesh prickle, and hear the throb of his heart. For an instant his courage failed. Why should he attempt to learn more or advance further? After all, what was it to him that he should risk his life so uselessly?

He experienced an eagerness to get away—to flee from this black, haunted house; in the silence and mystery all reckless daring seemed to ooze away, and his nerve failed. A species of pride alone held him there a moment longer, his fingers groping blindly for the lock.

He found it at last, merely an ordinary knob, and even as his hand grasped it he realized with a shock that the door was not even closed, but stood slightly ajar.

The surprise of this discovery startled Wayne into sudden mental reaction. Then, of course, there was no light within. Whether or not this basement door led to a room or a hallway it must be unoccupied, unused.

Through some neglect or oversight the two men, bearing between them their heavy burden, had failed to close and secure this outer door as they passed. But they had not paused in that part of the house; they had gone on with the unconscious man into some distant apartment, where they could safely use a light. This was why no gleam had revealed their entrance; no light was permitted where it could by any possibility be observed from without.

Then the room or hall directly within would be unoccupied, free for his exploration. Slowly, cautiously,

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he pressed the door open, staring into the dense blackness beyond. The hinges made no noise; not the slightest sound warned of lurking danger, or revealed any presence within.

Scarcely venturing to draw breath, he crept silently through the narrow opening, closed partially the door behind him, and stood motionless in that intense blackness.

It was a narrow hallway in which he found himself, not exceeding six or seven feet in width, with plastered walls. The touch of his fingers revealed this fact, and also an opening at his left, a doorway enclosed, the vacancy beyond concealed in darkness.

He advanced slowly, making not the slightest noise himself, and hearing no sound to create alarm. Once he paused, startled, his heart thumping; but it was only the distant gnawing of a rat, the intense silence rendering it plainly audible. A moment later his cautiously groping foot touched the lower step of a stairway, and his hand determined its formation—rude wooden steps with a strong side rail leading up steeply to the floor above.

He was tempted to creep up these and learn what might be at the top, but felt it safer first to explore more carefully the secrets of the basement. In this task, however, Wayne felt already more at ease, confident that he was alone; that these lower rooms were not in use. He discovered another opening to his right, opposite the stairs, and felt about within, satisfying himself that it was merely an ordinary cellar apartment, containing nothing except dirt and cobwebs.

He had again returned to the hall when the brooding silence was suddenly broken by the sharp click of a

latch above; while almost at the same instant a gleam of yellow light streamed down the steps, illuminating the space between stairway and door. Like a ghost the startled intruder slipped back into the concealing shadows beneath the protection of the stairs, which creaked noisily under the weight of a heavy tread.

CHAPTER V

LIFTING THE VEIL

The fellow descended slowly, as though somewhat doubtful of the strength of the stairs, while the shadow of his hand grasping the side rail was clearly outlined against the wall. The lamp flickered to his rather unsteady movements, but the radius of light widened, revealing the narrow hallway, and the plastered walls on either side.

Wayne, completely cut off from any possible escape, huddled down into his black corner, scarcely venturing to breathe. The newcomer must have nearly attained the lower step, when a sudden gust of air extinguished the light and left him in utter darkness.

An oath, unmistakably in Cowan's voice, expressed the measure of his disgust; then he struck a match, which flickered for an instant, and also puffed out.

"What the deuce!" he ejaculated, completely losing his temper. "Well, if that cursed door ain't open! Hey, there, Almerido, bring a light here, will you? Of all the blame fools—you forgot to shut this door."

There was the faint sound of movement above, a dim gleam of light, followed by an answering voice.

"You call me? Vat iss eet?"

"The door was left open when we brought that guy in, and my lamp has gone out. Can that laughin'!

Hold your light up higher, darn you; it's black as pitch down here. Harm? Naw, there's been no harm done, so far as I know; but we can't be none too careful."

He pushed the door tightly shut, his voice not ceasing its growl even as the spring-lock clicked. Wayne, peering cautiously around the protecting stairway, was able to perceive dimly the dark shadow of his huge figure, bending above the floor of the hall.

"You vant a match?" questioned the Mexican anxiously.

"No; there's nothin' here; you must have dropped the gun outside somewhere—likely when you stooped to pick up that bird—an' there's no use our tryin' to hunt it to-night. Darn it, man, hold your light higher up, so I can see to climb these dinky steps."

The stairs creaked to the strain of his weight; then the sound ceased, and the door above closed, leaving the basement once more in silence and darkness. Wayne straightened up and ventured to feel his way again to the foot of the steps, listening for any noise.

His ears could not detect even the retreating footsteps of the two men, but somewhere in the distance the stray rat resumed its gnawing. He turned, and tried the door; it had been securely locked by a key in addition to the spring catch, and the key removed.

He was a prisoner; his way of escape entirely cut off.

The full realization of his position did not occur to him at once; not, indeed, until he had thoroughly explored in the darkness those two front-basement rooms, only to discover their windows so strongly boarded up as to prevent any attempt at opening them.

Convinced of this fact, he groped his slow way back into the hall, baffled and desperate. He must find some

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way out, or else be discovered there in the morning and fall helplessly into the hands of these men. What their mercy would be might easily be imagined.

The true seriousness of his position was now apparent to him, and he realized how foolish had been his entering the house at all. However, it was already too late for regret; nothing remained but an earnest effort to discover some means of escape.

The front of the house offered none, but possibly there might be revealed some weakness at the rear. He slowly felt his way along the side wall of the hall, unable to distinguish the slightest object, and fearful lest some accidental noise might betray his presence.

The young man felt assured that thus far he was alone in the basement, yet, if some incautious movement dislodged anything, or even if his foot came in contact with a creaking board, it might very easily create an alarm above. Those fellows, hiding and conscious of criminal designs, would be suspicious of every sound and quick to investigate its cause.

The hall extended straight back, and his hands feeling blindly through the darkness disclosed the presence of two more rooms, one on each side of the passage; but both doors were closed, and he made no effort to open them, convinced that if they possessed windows they would in all probability also be tightly secured.

A few feet beyond these he was surprised to encounter a second stairway, which he judged must lead directly upward to the kitchen. Back of these arose the solid basement wall, proving conclusively that he had reached the end of his resources in that direction.

Nothing remained for him but a venture to the second floor. Wayne came back to the foot of the steps, un-

certain as to his next move, but endeavoring to bolster up his courage to the ascent.

It was no pleasant prospect, yet apparently no other choice remained. He must either stay where he was and await an inevitable discovery, or else risk the unknown danger above. Of the two, action of any kind was preferable, and this rear stairway surely offered a better chance than the one at the front.

If the two men still remained awake it was scarcely probable they would be found in the kitchen. At least it would be safe enough for him to creep up as far as the top of the stairs and listen.

He did this, finding his progress finally barred by a closed door of ordinary flimsy construction and apparently secured only by a latch. No glimmer of light appeared through the cracks, nor did any sound of occupancy emanate from the other side, as he listened intently with ear at the panel. Silently he lifted the iron latch and pressed the door partially open.

It operated noiselessly, and the darkness beyond was as profound as that in which he crouched. Whatever the room might be it was evidently unoccupied, and Wayne, his courage reviving, glided through the narrow opening, and closed the door behind him.

A moment's investigation revealed the fact that he had emerged into a large pantry, shelves lining the walls, with a sliding door opening into a commodious kitchen beyond. The shelves were mostly bare, with only a few odds and ends, largely in paper-bags stowed along one side.

The nature of the contents of these bags he could not clearly determine, although there was flour and sugar, in addition to a loaf of bread and part of a

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ham—the few necessities, no doubt, the present occupants of the house had stowed away. The unlighted kitchen beyond seemed fairly well furnished, for his cautious groping through its shadows revealed both a cook-stove and a gas-range, the former still retaining heat, and exhibiting a faint glimmer of fire in its grate.

The outer door was locked and he could find no key, while the windows were so secured that they could be opened only by force. He made an effort to release their fastenings, but the necessary noise caused him to desist, and turn his attention elsewhere. He searched for a hatchet, but the only thing approaching a weapon to be found was a small iron poker, useless for the purpose.

The condition of both pantry and kitchen seemed to indicate that those occupying the premises had no intention of making a prolonged stay. The supply of food was sufficient only for a day or two, and the contents of the wood-box bore evidence that the cooking was done largely by the use of broken fence pickets, or other odds and ends gathered about the place.

The rooms had a neglected, unswept feeling, the grime of dirt everywhere, as though no effort was being made to keep them clean. There were no curtains at the windows, and a clock on a shelf had run down.

Wayne sought for a knife, feeling about in the dark, and even exploring a drawer in a table he encountered, but found none of any value for his purpose, merely disclosing a cheap form of table cutlery.

His search, however, revealed two passages leading toward the front of the house, a closed door, probably opening into the upper hall, and a swinging door, which would naturally be the entrance to the dining-room.

This latter he pushed back just far enough to obtain a view within.

Directly opposite, revealed through hanging curtains a lamp was burning, the light sufficient to make dimly visible the interior between. A table, uncovered, had been pushed back against the wall, but, with the exception of two chairs, there was no other furniture in the room.

A faded, rather disreputable-looking carpet covered the floor—all alike evidently relics of former occupancy. Wayne had no more than time to grasp these features when some one spoke gruffly in the room beyond.

"What's that? Nothin' more in the bottle? She's empty; that's a fact. Well, I can't play poker without a drink. Where's Nell?"

"Gone up to bed, I suppose, an hour ago," replied another gruffly. "Anyhow, I ain't seen her since afore you fellers come in."

"Then it's sure up to you, Steve, to hunt up the liquid refreshments." The speaker was Cowan, plainly enough, and already half drunk. "There's another bottle or two hid away somewhere. Take that other lamp and hunt 'em in the kitchen. Go on now, er I'll boot yer."

There was the scraping of a chair pushed back, and the figure of a man passed the narrow slit of light. Wayne permitted the swinging door to close, conscious only that he must find a hiding-place before the fellow, bearing the light along with him, could reach the kitchen.

Not knowing where the liquor might be stored, there was no safety anywhere in those rooms, and his thought instantly turned toward the other door. It opened

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silently, and he emerged, not a moment too soon, into the desolation of the front hallway.

The door leading into the parlor stood ajar, giving vent to a stream of light sufficient to reveal the principal features. The hall was broad, but had a bare, deserted appearance, being entirely devoid of furnishings. There were no pictures on the wall, which was badly discolored, but a narrow strip of straw-matting extended the full length.

A wide stairway, ornamented by a carved rail, ran to the story above; while beneath this was a closet, the opened door revealing a few garments hanging within. Wayne slipped into its shadows and stood motionless, unable to decide on his next move, and listening intently to the advance of Steve.

The latter made no attempt to hide his movements, his footsteps echoing noisily through the deserted rooms. Apparently he knew exactly where to go on his errand, as he returned almost immediately, the volume of light in the front room considerably increased as he entered with the second lamp.

"That the last o' the stuff, Dave," he announced gloomily, placing a bottle heavily on the table. "I sure thought there was two, but there ain't."

"Then Nell must have taken one."

"Likely 'nough; she ain't none too particular, but if she has, it's up in her room, an' I don't go pokin' 'round after it—not me. Enyhow, I reckon this will keep us goin' fer a while. Come on, Almerido, it's your deal again; an' now, fer Mike's sake, give me some decent cards."

The pasteboards slapped noisily on the table, and there was a gruff exchange of remarks relative to the game

as the fellows resumed play, but the voices were so lowered that Wayne was able to distinguish only an occasional word. Unable to resist the temptation, and hoping to overhear some message of guidance, he slipped silently along the wall to where he could gain view through the partially open door.

The three men were seated at a round table, Cowan facing the entrance, but so intent on the fortunes of the game as to never lift his eyes. Judging from the scowl on his face he was in unusually bad humor, while an occasional muttered oath indicated that the cards were not running to his liking.

Almerido sat opposite, leaning well back in his chair, with Steve at the right. The latter was a young fellow, with red face and a shock of straw-colored hair, apparently well under the influence of drink, and in his shirt-sleeves. He looked like an ordinary gangster, quite capable of any dirty job, but not overly blessed with brains.

The bottle occupied the center of the table, with two glasses beside it, the Mexican to all appearances not indulging, although vigorously smoking a cigarette. The room itself bore the same evidences of age and neglect so apparent elsewhere in the house, yet was crowded with furniture, old-fashioned and expensive, and the floor was rather gayly carpeted.

A single glance had given Wayne these details, but the risk of being seen made him draw back, content to listen. The delay was not a long one, for Cowan flung down his remaining cards with a roar of anger.

"Darn such a hand!" he growled savagely. "I never played in worse luck. Push me that glass, Groggin."

The young fellow laughed as he did so—a half-tipsy laugh.

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"First time to-night I drew anything," he declared. "And you took the last two pots—so there's no kick comin'. What yer goin' ter do with thet guy, Dave?" he questioned, as an after-thought. "I'd croak him if it wus me."

"And likely get stretched for it," returned Cowan disgustedly. "I don't know which of you two duffers is the biggest fool. The Don here hed thet same notion."

"Vel," broke in the Mexican, "zen he no talk, an' who ever find heem here—hey? 'Tis my vay to make zem no talk."

"Yes, I guess it is; but this ain't Mexico, *señor*. Croakin' a guy up here is apt to turn out a rotten, bad job. Besides, why should we croak him?"

"Does anybody know he was after us? Maybe you do, but I don't; an' what's more, there ain't goin' ter be any killin' in this game, unless it's necessary."

"Then what yer goin' ter do with him?" insisted Groggin. "I reckon we got a right ter know that."

"S'posin' you have, and if I tell you, will you feel any better about it? All right, then, listen: I guess Almerido here is the brains of this outfit; anyhow, he's a pretty foxy guy, and has sure put us in the way of a bit of easy money."

"I'm not kickin' 'bout that, and the only reason I'm in on the game is because I know Chicago. Well, this is Chi, ain't it? And while we're here I'm goin' to have my say."

"I know this town, and how to work it, and neither one of you stiffs are goin' to tell me where to get off, or queer the job by croakin' anybody. We've got to do some of that stuff in a way, but it 'll be quiet, and ac-

cordin' to Hoyle. Up to date I've delivered the goods, haven't I, Don?"

His tone was aggressive, almost quarrelsome, and the Mexican hastened to appease him.

"*Si; eet vas as I vould, señor.*"

"All right, then. We have the girl, and left no trail. Not a fly cop has shown up, and the trap is set and ready to be sprung. We'd be fine birds, wouldn't we, to queer all this by killin' somebody, and gettin' every harness-bull in Chi barkin' at us like a pack o' wolves?"

"Shove that bottle over here, Steve."

CHAPTER VI

WITHIN THE HARTIGAN HOUSE

The drink evidently steadied him and put him in better humor, for he laughed boisterously as he put down the emptied glass.

"What you lookin' so solemn about?" he asked. "Afraid o' that guy we lugged in?"

"What wus he hangin' round yere in the night for?" said Groggin obstinately. "It don't look good to me."

"Well, maybe it don't altogether to me, either," admitted Cowan in a different tone. "But the feller is safe enough right where he is until we make our getaway. I've got his bein' there at the gate mostly figured an accident. Anyhow, he's no bull, an' there's no need croakin' him."

"How do yer know he ain't no bull?"

"'Cause I looked him over, an' went through his clothes, cully. There ain't a fly cop in this town I haven't lamped, an' besides, this fellow had no sign of a badge enywhere in his duds—not even a gat. Do you suppose he'd be nosing about here without either a gun or a star if he was after us?"

"Not on your life; that guy was just prowling around for luck; that's why I never went out and beat up the underbrush; soon as I seen him and frisked his pockets I knew 'twouldn't be no use—that the cuss was alone."

"Maybe you're satisfied; but I ain't. There's harness bulls made inter fly cops since you left Chi—maybe that's what's happened to him. I'm for playin' safe."

"We'll play safe enough. Look here, you duffer"—and there was the rattle of various articles being dumped on the table—"there's what come outer that guy's pockets—a key-ring, six dollars and eight cents in real money, a bit of a book with poetry in it, two newspaper clippin's about how to cook pertatoes, a little pen-knife, an' a handkerchief perfumed with violets.

"Not another darn thing. Is that the outfit of a bull? You make me plum' tired, Steve; how'd such a darned chicken-livered cuss as you are ever git in this business—plumbin' is more in your line."

"You'll find me all right, Dave Cowan," retorted the other angrily. "I ain't never went back on yer yet."

"I'm not liable to give you no chance. What do you say, Don?"

The Mexican must have shrugged his shoulders, evidently glad to express himself.

"Eet wos ze best as it ees," he replied lispingly. "I take your word, *señor*. Yet I not eentirely like the man here. Maybe ze ozzer place serve us besser. Eet be not long now we hide thus, but ze girl must be kept quiet—maybe ze month yet.

"I dink eet not safe to hol' ze man prisoner so long. Suppose he haf friend, who guess where he ees. Would eet not be better we change, *señor*?"

"In a day or so, Don—when we get word."

"So I say; ve guard him till zen. S'pose he vake up yet?"

"No; he got a knock-out for fair; but when he does come too he's trussed up so there'll be no squeak. I'll

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go down and look him over again before I lie down—to-morrow is likely to be some day."

"Vat you mean, some day?"

"In our line of business, Don. I told you, didn't I, that Dora got to the old money-grubber all right? Sure, I did; that was yesterday. I had a note from her this afternoon at the saloon.

"Say, that girl's a bird; she'd fool the best of 'em. He took the bait, sinker and all—hasn't a doubt but she's the right brat."

"Vy sh'u'd he not? Deed I not plan eet, an' vas she not ze very picture? I knew ven I first see her zat I makes ze work of art."

"Oh, you've got an eye, all right, Almerido; the only trouble is that Dora is too much of a roughneck to play the game long."

"Roughneck! How she be roughneck?"

"Tough, I mean; she's not the society kind. She'd cuss like a pirate if things went wrong, and queer the whole game. Course I gave her a good talkin' to, an' she'll be gentle for a while; but this sorter thing ain't her graft. It 'll have to be pulled quick, or she's liable to explode."

"She blow oop? She gif eet away?"

"That is all I'm afraid of now, Don. She is a dickens of a good girl, Dora is, but she's Irish, an' quick on the trigger. It's her mouth that's likely to go off. If we could use her gagged there 'd be nuthin' to it, old man."

Almerido pushed back his chair, and began excitedly pacing the floor, muttering to himself. Cowan laughed as though at a good joke.

"Come, don't take on like that, Don," he burst out finally. "Sit down. I done the best I could for you,

and found a dead ringer for the female up-stairs—didn't I?

"Well, they don't make 'em just alike in brains. That's Dora; she's got the looks, but is a little devil in every other way. She'll do all right, if we only move her quick enough, before she boils over.

"Well, what dif does that make to you? The sooner the job is pulled off the quicker we copper the kale, and git rid guardin' this female. Isn't that what we're after?"

"*Si, si,*" agreed Almerido explosively. "But eef eet be done too queek eet spoil all—ze police zay suspicion."

"Oh, no; not if it is a clear accident. There'll be no amateur work; trust Dora for that. She knows the panel-house game from A to Z. I tipped her about what was wanted, an' believe me she's got the nerve to do it, all right."

"How, *señor?*"

"Never mind that; this job is our part; all you've got to do is sit tight an' keep this girl out of the way. Where is she now?"

"We fixed up the other room," explained Groggin. "An' Nell put her in there to-night; she's safe."

"What room?"

"At the head o' the stairs; the windows are all boarded up, so I giv' her a light, an' something to read. Thar's no use a torturin' her, fer as I can see."

"Maybe not, Steve, but yer better wait fer orders next time. Yer do what I say, an' not whut you think ought ter be done."

"She's a heap safer whar she is now than in the other place."

"Maybe she is; but that ain't the point. We didn't

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pick you out to boss this job, but to do what we told you to. However, let it go to-night. That's the last drink you're takin'; shall we go to bed, or have another game?"

"I'd like to get some o' that money back; 'tain't late yet."

"Well, if you've got any left we'll try another hand—how is it, Don? Shall we clean this guy up? He'll be better off without it."

"Vy not zee first how ze feller was down ze stairs?" asked the cautious Mexican. "Maybe he rouse hisself now."

"All right, we'll take a look at the lad for luck, an' then clean up Groggin here. Bring along the lamp, Steve."

Wayne barely had time in which to slip out of sight within the recesses of the closet, pressing himself behind the protecting folds of a garment hanging there, when the three trooped into the hall. In the glare of the lamp their shadows were distinctly outlined against the wall, but no one spoke as they disappeared through the door leading downward to the basement.

Almerido was the last to descend, leaving the door partially ajar behind him. Through the crack the light grew dim, and finally vanished altogether.

Wayne's first thought was that this offered him an opportunity to escape from the house. He could serve the mysterious prisoner far better if he was once outside in safety than by any foolhardy attempt to communicate with her alone. Indeed, any such effort would only increase the danger of both.

In spite of the conversation overheard the young man learned very little as to the nature of the crime contemplated; who was involved, or what relation to it was

sustained by the girl prisoner. But he did realize that it was a crime of some magnitude, carefully planned, and the trap ready to be sprung. Some things had been said leading him to believe that even murder might be part of the game, while it was quite evident that the girl, detained under guard up-stairs, was merely being held to keep her out of the way.

She certainly was in no immediate peril, but needed to be concealed while the accomplice, Dora, played her part with some unsuspecting victim. As to whom that could be, Wayne had obtained no hint, yet it was clear enough that the thread of crime stretched back into Mexico, but was now being tightened into a knot here in Chicago.

The moment of action was close, and he could render far greater service by escaping from the house and reporting all he had learned to the police.

But in this attempt he found himself utterly baffled. The conspirators had left no opening behind. Their care in protecting themselves from the observation of neighbors, and safe-guarding their prisoner, had led them to see that every avenue from the house was absolutely secured.

The front door was padlocked, the key nowhere to be found; the windows of the front room were not only nailed down, but also tightly boarded.

The back part of the house, as he already knew, was secured in the same manner, and, beyond doubt, the only entrance left for use was the concealed door under the porch, by means of which he had originally obtained entrance. This also was now locked, and unavailable.

He was himself scarcely less a prisoner than the poor girl in that upper room.

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As this knowledge came to him in full significance he awoke to the fact that the three men were returning from their trip to the basement. Already the light streamed through the partially open door, and he could hear Almerido's querulous voice, as he led the way upstairs.

"Ze fool! I hope maybe he die yet, *señores*. Eef not, zen I make heem talk in ze morning like ve do in my countree. You know how zat vas, Cowan?"

"Do I!" boomed the latter below, with a snort. "A knife play, I guess; that would be about your style. Well, it might work. For Heaven's sake, Steve, hold that lamp so I can see—half these darn steps are gone."

Wayne was trapped in the front hall, with no opportunity to regain the protection of the closet before the Mexican emerged. Whatever new danger he might run into, he dare not risk discovery, and only one mode of evading this remained.

His mind grasped the situation in a flash, and the next instant he was up the broad stairway, leading to the second story, his flying feet noiseless on the strip of carpet with which the steps were partly protected.

In the semigloom above he crouched behind the rail, watching the passing shadows of the three men as they reëntered the parlor. From their grumbling voices he drew the conclusion that the injured man had partly recovered consciousness, but refused to talk. The Mexican was savage and vindictive, his cowardly fears prompting him to brutal methods, but Cowan and Groggin held to another view, and finally induced Almerido to resume his hand in the game.

Assured finally that the fellows would remain at the table for at least another half-hour, Wayne ventured

to straighten up and examine his surroundings. His thoughts were still upon a possible escape from the house, yet he had small hope of accomplishing such a feat. In all probability this section had been as carefully seen to as the floor below; besides, the ceilings were high, and, even if he succeeded in opening an unguarded window, the drop to the ground would be dangerous.

Yet he could but try. His knowledge that the woman called Nell occupied one of the rooms made it imperative that he proceed with caution, so as not to arouse her.

The hall ran straight back, narrowing as it approached the rear. One room occupied the part facing the head of the stairs. According to the report of Steve, this must be the apartment into which the mysterious prisoner had been transferred.

There was no transom over the door, nor did any crack reveal a light within, yet the formation of the hallway enabled him to figure it out as an apartment of some size. On the opposite side were three doors, two standing open, the third tightly closed, but with a slender gleam of light visible through its keyhole.

Wayne crept cautiously forward, and applied an eye to the aperture. The lamp was turned low, revealing only a portion of the room, and that not clearly. He could distinguish the foot of a bed, the table on which the lamp sat, and a chair beside it.

Beyond the table was a couch, on which a woman lay, sound asleep; beside her on the floor a half-filled bottle and an over-turned glass. He stared at her, his heart beating faster, as his mind grasped the meaning. This must be Nell, who had charge of the girl, sound asleep from the liquor she had taken.

She was motionless, lying as though in a stupor, not

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even her outer clothes removed, her face toward him—dead to the world.

She was a woman of thirty or so, rather good-looking—except for a cruel mouth—with black hair and excessively heavy eye-brows. Even as he gazed at her his eyes caught the glimmer of metal on the table.

It was a key!

What key? To her own room likely, as the door was unlocked. Yet it might not be; indeed it was even more probable that it would prove to be the key to her prisoner's room. Nell would have no use for any lock on her door, but she was in charge of the other, and the key would naturally be in her possession.

Wayne felt so assured as to this, and so confident of being able to secure the key without discovery, that the temptation to make the attempt overmastered him. He had no plan, no purpose—yet here was the opportunity to speak with the young woman whose appeal had led him into all this danger, and learn from her own lips why she was being held captive. It was not in his nature to resist; besides, she might suggest some means of escape from the place.

The first step was easily accomplished, the door opening noiselessly to his touch, the sleeping woman never stirring as he slipped across the narrow space intervening, and his fingers closed on the key. Another moment and he was again in the hall, the door closed behind him, and the key in his possession.

He bent over the railing, listening to the voices of the men below. The Mexican evidently had encountered a run of ill-luck.

“Eet vos ze king I play! I do not know you draw zat ace.”

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"Well, you found out, Don," said Cowan, quite indifferent. "Better luck next time; it's Steve's deal."

Satisfied that he had ample time for the experiment, Wayne softly inserted the stolen key in the lock of the girl's door.

CHAPTER VII

IN PRESENCE OF THE LADY

He felt a thrill of exultation as the key turned silently. Desperate as his own situation undoubtedly was, this was the supreme moment of this strange adventure, and he was still young enough to experience its inspiration. Beyond this door, already unlocked, was the one whom he had come to seek, the girl with the eyes he remembered so well, about whom he had been thinking earnestly ever since she had dropped the strange note at his feet.

He felt himself eager to see her again, to sense the mystery of her presence. And yet a strange hesitancy restrained his hand, gave him a sense of reluctance to intrude. He stood breathless, listening to the slap of cards below, mingled with an occasional ejaculation, endeavoring to bolster his courage.

Then he smiled grimly with determination, and turned the knob.

He was inside, the door closed behind him, before his eyes even ventured to observe his surroundings. Then he straightened up and remained motionless, instantly aware that his silent entrance had not even aroused the one sleeping occupant.

It was a rather spacious apartment, furnished richly, although not in the best of taste, and exhibiting on all sides the evidence of neglect and years. The hangings

were still intact, but sadly faded, and the costly carpet was discolored. The bed was an old-fashioned four-poster. A small lamp stood on a round stand, with an open book lying face down beside it, while just beyond, the soft glow on her features, the girl rested asleep in a cushioned chair.

Practically Wayne saw nothing else—recognizing her instantly, and unable to remove his gaze. Her eyes were closed, shadowed by long lashes, but now, for the first time, he was permitted to look upon the soft contour of her face, the velvet smoothness of cheeks, the round, full throat, the slightly parted lips, with gleam of white teeth between, and the flaxen hair, given its tint of gold by the flame of the lamp.

She was more than beautiful—she was interesting. There was a touch of true character in the firmness of chin, and the slight line of frown between her eyes. Her slender hands, clasped in her lap, were ringless, while the foot peeping from beneath the dark-blue skirt was faultlessly shod.

She must have felt the eager interest of his gaze, for suddenly her eyes opened and she sat up, grasping the arms of the chair as she stared at him, as though doubting the reality of his presence. Before she could cry out, he spoke softly:

“Do not be afraid. I am here as a friend.”

“A friend! But how did you get here? Who are you?”

“You have no memory of my face then?”

She shook her head uncertainly, her eyes full of bewilderment as she continued to look at him.

“I cannot seem to recollect—yet—yet you do not appear one to frighten me; you—you are a gentleman.”

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"I trust I may prove so," Wayne said seriously. "This afternoon you dropped a note from your cab in Jackson Park—"

"And you are the man? I—I scarcely dared look at you then."

"I am the one. I have come in response to that note."

"You—you have come! Oh, this is so wonderful I can scarcely believe it true. You have actually come! Yet how did you get here? Are those others gone?"

"No; fortune and accident favored me. There are three men playing cards now below in the parlor—one is the Mexican with whom you were driving in the park."

"Juan Almerido, and—and that horrible Cowan, that detestable Steve Groggin."

"Those are the ones. We must speak quietly. The woman is asleep in her room. She had been drinking, and I crept in without disturbing her, and got the key to your door."

"She is the most dangerous of all; I am terribly afraid of her."

"They call her Nell?"

"Yes, Nell Brennon—that is the name she goes by; but she told me once she was Cowan's wife; he used to be a saloon-keeper and a prize-fighter; and is actually proud of it. Tell me, please, who are you?"

"My name is Stuart Wayne."

"Wayne—Stuart Wayne. It sounds familiar; I know I have heard it before."

"Quite possible," smilingly, "as I write stories."

"Why, of course! How stupid of me, and yet how strange. Is this one of your books?"

She picked up the volume, lying open on the table,

and held it out, her eyes sparkling. His own laughed back their surprise.

"My very latest. It is an odd reunion surely. How did you chance to possess this in such a hole?"

"Almerido bought it for me on the train; I've tried to read just to kill time, but am afraid I do not in the least know what it is all about. I have been so troubled, so worried. I wonder I am not insane."

She buried her face in her hands, and for a moment he stood silent, looking at her.

"I understand," he said at last gently. "Yet I need to know more if I would be of aid. Do you mind telling me who you are—the letters Z. G. mean so little."

She lifted her eyes, but there were no tears in them—just hopefulness and faith.

"I am Zaida Grayson," she answered, her voice clear, her eyes frankly meeting his own. "And I am so overwhelmed by the thought that you have actually come to me, come in answer to that foolish note, that I cannot even express my gratitude."

"Nor do I ask such expression," exclaimed Wayne, made suddenly aware of their perilous position by the loud explosion of an oath in the room below. "We have no time to say anything to each other, except as it relates to our escape from this house. But first I need to understand the situation better. May I question you?"

"You mean about why I am here?"

"Yes; what danger threatens, and if you know any way out."

"You know none?"

"I have endeavored to discover some opening on two floors in vain—every window is boarded, and every door is locked."

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"They were when we arrived. That was at night, but I have been taken out twice since. I do not know about these upper windows, for they are protected by blinds; but while Almerido had me at the park this afternoon they boarded up this room and moved me into it. Doubtless they thought me more easily guarded here than at the rear of the house."

"Your note said you were confined in the annex."

"Yes, down the hall. I had loosened one of the blinds, but the room was too high up to venture an escape that way. I imagine it was discovered I could open the blind, and that was why this room was prepared."

"But why are you held here?" he insisted anxiously. "Even if I have to leave you I shall need to know that in order to bring help. Is it necessary to conceal the truth from me?"

She extended her hand, permitting it to linger in his grasp, but there was no smile on lips, or in eyes, as she faced him frankly.

"There is truly nothing I would conceal from you," she answered gravely and slowly. "You are not a stranger, but a friend. Yet, strange as it may seem, I cannot tell you—because I do not know."

"You do not know!"

"Scarcely more than yourself. I am a prisoner, brought thousands of miles, under threat of death if I attempt to create an alarm; never permitted to be alone for a moment, guarded during the day by two men, and at night by the woman.

"I was not permitted to speak to any one during the entire journey, and my meals were served in the drawing-room of a sleeping-car.

"I did not even know what our destination was. If I had not recognized certain buildings and street names I should not even have been aware of the city to which I had been taken."

"You have lived before in Chicago, then, or visited here?"

"I lived here as a child—until I was fourteen."

"And since then?"

"My father was an engineer—a civil engineer—and my mother died. He was given the superintendency of a plantation in Mexico, and we moved there. The town was Alcicas, and I have lived there ever since—until he was killed, they told me by accident, although it occurred during a raid by Villa's outlaws."

"You had brothers—sisters?"

"I was the only child. There was only one other American woman in the town; but I was not even permitted to go to her."

"Not permitted! Who prevented you?"

"The Villistas. They were there for two weeks, killing cattle and looting all the shops in town. I dared not venture on the street at first, and when I did make the effort found myself a prisoner. Our home was rifled from top to bottom—everything taken or destroyed."

"Was that when you first met this fellow Almerido, the one you were with in the park?"

"Yes; he was an officer with Villa. Those were his men left in control of the town. I do not know what happened, or what he found which led to his protection of me."

"He scarcely allowed any one else to even approach me; there was a guard at my door day and night. Some-

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times since the suspicion has come that he found some information among my father's papers which had led to all this."

"Did he question you?"

"No; not directly, although he appeared strangely interested in my remembrance of Chicago; of my mother when she was living. Once he asked about her father, and seemed to know something of him—he was very old and eccentric; and it was rather surprising for the Mexican to mention his name."

"He did not say where he heard of your grandfather?"

"Oh, yes; he explained that father, before he died, had begged him to protect me, and take me to my grandfather. He told him where money was to be found for that purpose, and Almerido gave him his promise."

"It was only because I believed he had been kind to my father that I was able to be civil to the man. In reality I—I despised him."

"You had faith in what he said?"

"There was nothing else for me to do but trust him. I had nothing—no friends, no money. I was not even permitted to communicate with any one; my father was buried before I was told of his death."

"Your grandfather lived in Chicago?"

"Yes; yet that to me was the strangest part of all. His name was never mentioned by my father. We had neither seen nor heard of him since my mother died."

"He was never reconciled to the marriage, and I only saw him once, as a child. I am sure my father never had a letter from him."

"You told Almerido this?"

"Yes; was there any reason why I should not?"

"I am not sure. What happened later?"

"The soldiers finally rode away, leaving the town in flames; but Almerido did not go with them. He sent them away under an officer, promising to join shortly. He pretended he would serve me, and I had to permit.

"He had plenty of money, and in three days we succeeded in reaching El Paso. For a week we were there, in the Mexican quarter, and I was not once allowed on the street.

"That was when his manner changed, and he became almost brutal. I grew afraid of him. Before then he had been gentle and considerate, and I had stifled my dislike. Then one night he took me to the train bound north. At the station we met the other two."

"Cowan and Nell Brennon?"

"Yes; I did not see the one they call Steve until we arrived here. He had this house ready for us."

"And these four compose the whole gang?"

"I think there is one other—a younger woman, with light hair and blue eyes, rather flashily dressed when I saw her. She came in with Nell the day after we arrived here, but they only stopped for a moment.

"She eyed me very carefully, but did not speak until just before they left. I thought her words and actions were very strange."

"Why, what did she say?"

"This is all I caught: 'All to the good, Nell; I've got an eyeful; it's a cinch; let's go.'"

"You did not even hear her name mentioned?"

The girl shook her head.

"No. I asked the Brennon woman later who she was, but the creature only laughed. I have told you everything, Mr. Wayne—everything I know."

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Wayne dropped into a chair, his hand shading his eyes, as he endeavored to better concentrate his thoughts. Instead of clearing, the mystery had deepened. Apparently he was further away than ever from its solution.

He was convinced of Zaida's truthfulness; that she possessed absolutely no conception of the purpose and plan of her captors; yet now he knew that some deep-laid scheme of crime was behind all this preparation. Two facts stood clearly forth before him—Almerido must have discovered something of importance among Grayson's papers; and this discovery had reference to the grandfather in Chicago. With this conjecture ceased; but not suspicion.

"They have suggested nothing to you?" he questioned, lifting his eyes to her face. "No hint of marriage?"

"That was never mentioned"—in surprise. "Whom would I marry?"

"I cannot even guess. The affair offers me no foundation to work upon. Whatever their purpose can be, it is difficult to conceive why you should be kept hidden away here, a prisoner. How long have you been in this house?"

"Three weeks; most of that time only Steve and Nell have been with me."

"The others were completing arrangements elsewhere; now, no doubt, the wires are all laid, and they are simply waiting the moment to press the button. It looks as though they merely desired to keep you out of sight—your identity hidden. Is your grandfather wealthy?"

"I have always been told so; I remember as a child his house seemed like a palace to me."

"Do you know where he lived?"

"Only that it is upon the North Side, near the Lake."

"He is an old man, I presume?"

"Over eighty, but vigorous enough when I saw him last. You see," she explained, "mother only took me there twice, when she went on some errand. The only other time I saw him was at the funeral."

"Since then even his name has not been mentioned. I know he lived alone, with a housekeeper. Can you figure out from all this why I am held prisoner here?"

"No, I cannot," Wayne admitted gravely. "I can only guess from what I have seen, and what you have told me. It is very strange, but it must be your grandfather's money the fellows are after. There has been no attempt to misuse you, except the holding of you prisoner—no word of insult, or suggestion that they required your services in any way."

"That is what makes it all so mysterious. They must be playing for big stakes, and the only certain way of blocking their game, whatever it may be, is for you to escape from their control."

"My plan is to hide here until those men go to bed, and then the two of us will steal quietly down-stairs, and find some means of getting out at the rear."

"You think that possible?"

"Why not? Nell is supposed to guard you—she is drunk and asleep. Do any of the men ever come in your room at night?"

"No; I am locked in."

"Then there is nothing for us to do but wait—listen!" and Wayne caught her arm tightly. "The card-party is breaking up now. I'll blow out the light."

They stood closely beside each other, in complete dark-

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ness, his hand still clasping her sleeve. The shuffling of feet below, and the occasional growl of a voice, were clearly audible.

Then they became aware that the three men were climbing the stairs. At the top one yawned sleepily. It must have been Cowan, for it was his voice which spoke:

“Leave the lamp here, Steve, so Nell can use it. Why, what does this mean, boys. Here’s the key left in the girl’s door!”

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN IN THE BASEMENT

Wayne's fingers closed tighter on his companion's arm, and his teeth clinched to keep back an exclamation. He had made a mistake, played the fool, and now it was likely to cost them both their only chance.

However, there was nothing to do but remain silent, hoping for the best. The voices outside were as clearly heard as if the men speaking were actually in the room.

"Vat you zay, Cowan?" shrilled Almerido, excitedly. "Zee girl not locked up? Eet spoil all eef she go!"

"Oh, she's locked up all right; Nell likely forgot the key. Drunk again—hey, Cowan?" broke in Groggin, not displeased with the situation.

The big fellow gave utterance to an oath, and his heavy tread echoed in the hall.

"If she is I'll give her a lesson!" he growled savagely. "This is the second time she's played that trick, an' it 'll be the last!"

Groggin laughed as the irate man flung open the woman's door, but hushed suddenly when the fellow emerged instantly, dragging her after him, half awake, sobbing out her denial.

"Honest, Dave, I never left it there?" she cried, struggling to free herself. "Let go of me, you brute! I locked her in, and put the key on the stand by the bed.

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"No, I dunno what's become of it. Hit me, if you dare, you big stiff! If you do I'll land you, all right. Of course I took a drink; but that's no more than you did yourself. The girl's safe enough—why don't you go in and see?"

A hand grasped the knob, and a surprised voice uttered a cry. "Unlocked! The key never was turned!"

The fellow flung the door wide open, the yellow light of the upheld lamp streaming through the aperture and revealing the interior. Cowan pushed forward, the others clustering in the doorway behind, all staring in speechless amazement at what they saw.

For an instant they must have doubted the evidence of their eyes, for Wayne had thrust the trembling girl behind him, and stood fronting them. In spite of the peril of his position he felt cool, confident, and his eyes smiled as he viewed the bewilderment in their faces.

"Well, gentlemen," he asked quietly, "why this intrusion?"

"Who are you? Where did you come from?"

Wayne kept his eyes steadily upon the questioner, one hand free, the other buried in the pocket of his coat. His only immediate hope was bluff; that these fellows, conscious of being involved in crime, might mistake him for an officer of the law.

He was unarmed, with four against him, yet the experiment was worth trying. Certainly boldness promised more than timidity.

"There is no time for me to answer those questions, Dave Cowan," he said shortly. "But I'll tell you where I am going. Miss Grayson and I are going out that door, down those stairs, and through the basement hallway to the yard!"

"I guess not!"

"Who will stop us?" asked Wayne, calmly and coolly. "You? I have a gun in this pocket. If one of you put out a hand I'll shoot."

"Come in here. Now range up there, and keep your hands in sight. Listen to me a minute—I know every one of you."

"Yes, you do!"

"That's true, Cowan. I'll prove it. You are a Chicago crook, an ex-saloon-keeper and prize fighter; Nell Brennon there is your woman. The other two are Steve Groggin, an ordinary thief, and the Mexican is Juan Almerido, one time with Villa."

"I've got the goods on you four, and you've got the choice right now of a getaway or a fight. If I begin shooting it is going to start something pretty lively for your bunch."

The apparent uncertainty of the fellows increased Wayne's faith that they were unarmed, and that his calm assumption of authority had completely cowed them. No one spoke, as his gaze wandered from face to face; not an eye met his.

"Well," he insisted, "how is it, Cowan? Do we go?"

"I believe ye're bluffin. Ye're no fly-cop, or ye'd 'a' flashed a badge before this; an' yer've got no gat in that pocket, either."

"I'm too old a hand ter hav' that sort o' gaft thrown inter me, young feller. When yer git out o' here they'll carry yer."

He came with a rush, both arms working, but, at that, he half expected to be greeted with a shot, and neglected his guard. Wayne was ready and quick to take advantage of this uncertainty. He met him half-way, both

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hands free, driving one fist straight to an unprotected stomach.

Cowan grunted and reeled, sickened by the sudden blow, and before he could recover Wayne sent his right smashing against the exposed chin. All the weight of one hundred and eighty pounds was behind those clinched knuckles, and Cowan, fairly lifted off his feet by the terrific force of the blow, staggered half across the room before he fell.

Yet the man was not knocked out, and swift and effective as the action had been, Wayne's recovery was not quick enough to save him from the others. They were at him like a pack of wolves, even the woman clawing savagely at his throat, screeching her hatred, until he broke her grip loose and sent her sprawling backward over a chair.

Groggin was a barroom fighter, ready to use either fingers or teeth, but without even the rudiments of the art of self-defense; all that made him dangerous was the presence of Almerido, who had whipped out a knife with which he was lunging desperately over the shoulder of the other, endeavoring meanwhile to keep out of danger himself.

"Hol' to ze hands, Steve," he screamed excitedly. "I sleet hees throat—ah!"

It was Wayne's foot at his waist-line, doubling him up like a jack-knife, his hand flying wide open as he staggered back, the released blade falling to the floor. Dragging Groggin with him, Wayne made a dash forward, but both Cowan and Nell were again on their feet.

He fought his way to the door, using the helpless Steve to ward off the blows of his assailants, and finally hurling the fellow's body half-way down the stairs.

Twice he broke free from Cowan's clinch, the second time gaining the landing, and stood at bay, gripping a heavy stool found there, threatening to cave in the skull of the ex-pugilist if he advanced a step nearer.

Cowan hesitated, his eyes ugly and menacing; then flung a word of unintelligible command back across his shoulder to the woman. In response she crept past, sliding along the wall, beyond the reach of Wayne, whose back was protected by the stair-rail.

He had but one conception of her purpose; she had been despatched for a weapon, and he must put that big brute out of the fighting before she could return. The strange scene burned in on his brain—a picture to live forever in memory.

Below him Groggin clung to the banisters to keep from plunging the rest of the flight, his white, terror-stricken face ghastly in the yellow light as he peered upward, afraid even to regain his feet. Cowan fronted him just outside the door, a huge, threatening bulk, a gash cut in his lip from which blood dripped, his great fists like sledge-hammers. He seemed poised for a rush, eyeing the uplifted stool with the savage cunning of a trapped beast.

Beyond him Wayne had a glimpse of the shadows within the room—of the dim outlines of the girl, whose fate hung in the balance.

And the sight of her, the knowledge that Nell would return in a moment, weapon in hand, urged him to action. If he could brain Cowan before the woman reappeared the way of escape was open, for Steve was already out of the struggle.

Wayne advanced, the heavy stool flung back for a blow. Cowan edged along the wall out of his reach, not

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as though attempting to escape, but as if looking for an opening to close; his eyes glinting with hatred, his clenched fists ready to strike. Slowly the two circled, watchful of each other, every muscle strained for the emergency, Wayne seeking to draw in closer, his antagonist endeavoring to remain beyond the sweep of the poised stool.

It was all the work of a tense moment, but the movement forward drew Wayne into the very center of the hall, with Cowan apparently trapped against the blank wall behind him, any further retreat impossible. Seemingly the fellow realized the situation, for he gave vent to an oath.

"You think you've got me!" he roared, his arm flung up as though to ward off a blow. "Now, Nell—quick!"

The floor yawned beneath Wayne's feet; he flung out his hands to grip at the edge of the hole; his fingers slipped, and he went plunging down, clawing uselessly at smooth boards into intense blackness. He recalled afterward the glimpse he had of Cowan's face, the scream from the lips of the girl, but that was all: a second later he lay in a motionless heap, unconscious, at the foot of the shaft, shrouded by utter blackness.

Through an open knot-hole, and along a narrow crack, where two boards failed to join perfectly, the early light of dawn found entrance into the basement. It was a pale, sickly light, only serving to render the place more gloomy and desolate, revealing remnants of coal scattered about the floor, and festoons of cobwebs clinging to the beams overhead.

Dirt and dust were everywhere. The body huddled against the rear wall moved slightly, showing that life yet lingered in what had seemed a mere pile of rags.

scarcely visible in the semidarkness. The man's head lifted enabling him to glance wonderingly about, and finally he managed to struggle up on one elbow.

He was still dazed and but half-conscious from the effect of his terrible fall, aware only that he ached in every muscle, and felt it impossible to stand alone. Yet, with the movement, his brain cleared, and he remembered the struggle above, and the springing of the trap under his feet.

They had not followed him; he had simply been left lying where he fell; no one had cared whether he was dead or alive—probably thought he was dead.

But what of Zaida Grayson?

Her scream as he went down yet rang in his ears; was clearer in his memory than anything else. The recollection afforded him strength to sit up. As he moved, bracing himself with one arm, a voice spoke out of the black shadows opposite.

"Some fall you got, partner; where did you drop from?"

Wayne wet his lips, believing for an instant that his imagination was playing tricks. All he could see was the vaguest shadows.

"Did some one speak?" he asked, at last.

"The best I could with this gag only half out. Whoever you are, do you think you could crawl over here and help untie me? Then we might do something."

The meaning came to Wayne's brain in a flash—this was the fellow Cowan had knocked out at the gate; he had fallen into the basement where the other was being held prisoner, and whoever the man was, their interests were now the same. The delay and silence led the stranger to call out impatiently.

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"What's the matter? Done up?"

"No, I think not; I'm pretty badly bruised, but I'll try to help you."

"Some drop you had. I saw the light glimmer down that shaft, and you surely struck hard. I thought you were dead, the way you lay; but I couldn't get over there. Unconscious?"

"Yes, but don't seem to have any broken bones."

"Had some fight up above. I could hear that racket down here. I'll certainly be glad to get out of this lacing,"

By clinging to irregularities in the wall Wayne managed to gain his feet. His head swam dizzily, while sharp twinges of pain made him afraid to attempt the passage erect and unaided. In desperation he crept across through the dirt to where the other lay.

It was the blackest corner of the cellar, and, even as he worked at the knotted ropes, the face of the man remained invisible. He loosened the gag first and then the strands binding the wrists.

These had been drawn so tightly the hands were numb and helpless, but were brought back to some semblance of life, while the rescuer devoted his attention to the strapped feet. The other sat up, eager to learn what had occurred.

"You don't belong to this gang?" he asked doubtfully.

"No. I came in just behind you, I saw you slugged at the gate."

"You did! Well, that was a fool trick of mine, running blindly into those fellows. I never saw or heard them until we were face to face. How many were there?"

"Two—an ex-prize-fighter, named Cowan, and a Mexican. It was Cowan who hit you."

"Yes, he hit me, all right. I never knew what did do it. I am certainly an honor to the force to be knocked out like that."

"You are a detective?"

"Sort of one—United States Secret Service; you'd never think it."

"The fact they got you proves nothing," said Wayne, tugging at a buckle. "There, I've got that at last. Now you can stretch out your legs. But those fellows searched you and found nothing?"

The man laughed, beating his feet against the floor to restore circulation.

"That was just a bit of good luck," he said easily, his happy-go-lucky nature beginning to reassert itself. "I was off duty, and had changed my clothes."

"You see, it was this way: On a Madison car I happened to notice a female that I knew once—rather shady reputation—and wondered what she was doing here. Took the notion to follow her, and brought up at this house."

"Nell Brennon?"

"That's the party; she was mixed up with Maxwell's bunch of counterfeiters about three years ago. Who did you say the big duffer was who hit me?"

"Dave Cowan."

"Never heard of him—what others are in this gang?"

"An ex-officer with Villa in Mexico—Juan Almerido; he's the brains of the outfit; a poor devil named Steve Groggin, and a girl called Dora. I have never seen her."

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He seemed to be turning these names over in his mind, but, at last, admitted:

"They are all new ones to me. Give me your hand, and I'll see if I can stand up. Pretty groggy yet, but I'll make it. Let's get out into the light—I want to see what you look like. Why, darn it, man—are you Stuart Wayne?"

"Stiles! Dan Stiles! Why this is too good to be true. I never recognized your voice."

"Why should you? I wouldn't know it myself. But, my boy, this grows interesting. Whatever sent you into the detective business?"

"I thought you made up your own plots, and then solved them to suit yourself. How did you get mixed up with this gang, and what's their graft?"

"I can answer your first question easily enough, Dan," said Wayne, the two squatting on the floor, and staring at each other in the dim light, which barely revealed their faces. "But as to the last I am as much at sea as you are. However, you may find a clew, so I'll tell my story."

He began at the beginning, tracing his experiences briefly, aware of the increasing interest in Stiles's eyes as he proceeded. The latter spoke only once or twice, getting some point clear, until the narrative was completed.

"As rum a story as I ever heard," he admitted finally. "If I hadn't got mixed up in it I'd put it down as a pipe dream. There's only one thing clear—they're after the old man's swag. But how do they aim to get it?"

"You have no theory?"

"Only a vague one. There must have been some information discovered in Grayson's papers to give that

Mexican the great idea. What it was I don't know—but he must have seen easy money.

"The only scheme I can imagine is they are holding the girl prisoner until they can gain control of the old man. What did you say his age was?"

"Somewhere in the eighties."

"And he lives on the North Side, near the lake, alone, except for a housekeeper. It might be murder, or just plain robbery. What's his name?"

Wayne stared at his questioner in startled surprise.

"Why, I never thought to ask," he said weakly. "I haven't the slightest idea. He was the father of Miss Grayson's mother—that is all I know."

Stiles laughed.

"Then we are at the very beginning of things," he confessed. "For you and I are here alone—the whole gang cleared out of the house two hours ago."

CHAPTER IX

THE END OF A BLIND ALLEY

Wayne got to his feet; his head still reeled, but otherwise he felt quite himself again.

"Are you sure? How do you know?"

"Of course, I don't know," answered Stiles, "but I have every reason to believe they left soon after you were given your tumble. I could hear them moving about freely enough for a while; two of them came in here with a lantern and looked us both over.

"I suppose they were satisfied, for neither one said anything. I couldn't make out their faces, the way they screened the light. I heard them talking after they got out into the hall.

"A little later the whole outfit must have come downstairs, and slipped out the front way. That was quite a while before daylight, and I haven't heard a sound since."

"No street-cars run out here after midnight."

"Then they walked it, unless they had some sort of rig in the barn. Anyhow, they've gone. Give me a lift, Wayne; I believe I can stand up now, and we may as well begin digging ourselves out of this hole."

He was ten minutes exercising the numbness out of his limbs, before he could navigate alone safely, but in the meanwhile Wayne, whose injuries were bruises, made a thorough survey of their prison, finding the heavy door bolted securely, and the single window so protected by

iron grillework that the outside boards could not, by any effort, be reached or dislodged. He turned in despair to his companion.

"Those demons meant for us to die in here," he said soberly. "They haven't left a place big enough for a rat to get through, Stiles. That is why they left us alive; they knew we'd starve to death anyhow."

"I thought quite likely that was the game. It only shows that the gang is playing for high stakes, and that they are no pikers," commented the detective, staring about him into the darker corners.

"But I positively refuse to die in any such way. Let's see, what can be done? The cusses emptied all my pockets—what have you got in yours?"

"A key ring, a few dollars in change, some postage-stamps, a knife—"

"Hand that over; good, here's one fair-sized blade. Say, isn't that a bit of a pole over there?"

"Sure, good hickory; put the end in between those iron bars, and try knocking a bigger hole in that board—I want more light."

It required the strength of both to accomplish this, but together they broke out quite a splinter, letting in a stream of daylight which made visible the entire interior. The surrounding solid stone walls were not encouraging, but Stiles was in no way down-hearted, as he started in to examine each separate inch of surface.

"There is a basement room in front of this," he said, cheerfully, "and the wall between is more likely to be thin than those others. If we can loosen a small stone, so as to insert that hickory pole, we ought to pry something loose—not very good mortar, either, old man. Now, let's try our luck here."

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It was slow work, hard on the hands, and they took turns at it, encouraged to persevere by the slight progress made. The knife blade broke twice, but was really bettered for the purpose.

Fortunately, the original builder had been prodigal with his mortar, giving them ample room between the stones; yet at that it required the constant labor of an hour to loosen one so that—using the pole as a battering ram—they could succeed in driving the bit of rock through into the forward apartment.

It fell noisily, and Stiles gave vent to a satisfied laugh, as he peered through the opening into the darkness beyond.

"Messrs. Cowan and company are not through with us yet," he said, grinning with satisfaction, "thanks to your little old knife. Now get busy here, Wayne, and we'll pry another one out in a jiffy.

"That's it, lad; put your whole weight on it; wait, let me dig a little first—now we ought to bring her. How is that? Do you think you could squeeze through that hole?"

Wayne made the effort, assisted by the vigorous pushing of the detective, and succeeded in wiggling out on the other side, sprawling down onto a brick floor in profound darkness. Stiles, a much smaller man, followed easily, and the two waited quietly a moment to regain their breath.

Unable to perceive even a hand held before their eyes, they felt their way cautiously along the wall and out into the hall through an open door. Here the darkness was no less intense, while the silence and desolation of the house thoroughly convinced them of its desertion. Wayne reached out and touched his companion.

"Shall we try the door? It is the only one unbarred."

"Not yet; let's grope our way up-stairs. It's not likely they carried away the lamps, and I want to look around a bit—we might run onto a clue."

They found what they sought on the card-table in the front room, and the light enabled them to explore the house thoroughly, room by room. Stiles never overlooked a closet, and his lamp threw its rays into every corner and crevice, but to no purpose.

Not so much as a scrap of paper, or a belonging which could be associated with the late occupants, was discovered. The drawers of tables and bureaus were empty; even the eatables in the pantry had disappeared; the only thing remaining to remind Wayne of his past experience being the copy of his novel lying open on the table, where the girl had placed it.

In the hurry of their flight nothing else had been overlooked. Indeed, that flight had not really been a hurried one. According to Stiles they had taken nearly two hours in the preparation for departure, time enough, surely, in which to make everything safe. Evidently Cowan felt no fear of the prisoners confined in the basement; he believed them out of the reckoning; but their presence in the house was proof that suspicion had been aroused, and hence it was safer for him to seek other quarters.

But he was in no way hurried about it; anytime before daylight would do, and he made sure that no trail possible to follow should be left behind. The two searchers, convinced of the uselessness of further effort, discussed the situation, in no pleasant humor.

"There isn't a thing in the place less than forty years old," said Stiles, staring about. "The old fox has made

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a clean getaway. So far as I see we might as well go."

"Where?"

"Well, to breakfast first; I am about famished. After that we'll talk it over."

"You have no plan, nothing to suggest? Surely you have no intention of dropping the affair?"

"I judge you have no such thought?"

"I?" indignantly. "No; I am in it to the end. I could never forgive myself if I deserted Zaida Grayson and left her in the hands of those brutes. But, Dan, what can we do?"

"Frankly, Wayne, just at present I can't answer that question. Your failure to secure the name of the girl's grandfather, or any information leading to his discovery, puts us in a blind alley. These people will go into some hole, and disappear.

"The only one of the four I know is Nell Brennon, and to try and find her in this city—even if they remain here—would be hunting a needle in a hay stack. These people are sure to feel now that some one is on their trail, and keep out of sight.

"We've lost all the advantage we ever had. If I can only succeed in establishing the identity of the others, it will help."

"How can that be done?"

"Possibly through the police department. We'll interview Bill Dermott first, at the City Hall. He'll know Cowan, and where he hangs out, if any one does. But there is no use drifting around here any longer—let's get out."

They had breakfast on Madison Street, in a small restaurant, discussing the situation again but coming to no more definite decision. Wayne's hat had been

ruined and he bought another, and after the two had visited a boot-blackening establishment and wash-room they once more made a fairly presentable appearance.

Wayne, still obsessed with the memory of the girl, and her danger, insisted on their visiting police headquarters at once. Stiles consented, although without exhibiting any particular enthusiasm.

It was ten thirty when the two arrived at the City Hall, and ascended in the elevator. Stiles's name, mentioned to the officer at the door, gained them immediate admittance, and, a moment later, both were ushered into the presence of the chief.

Dermott, a large, burly man, with deepset eyes under heavy eye-brows, and wearing a closely clipped gray mustache, glanced searchingly up into the face of each, waved his stenographer out of the room and, with the same motion, indicated chairs.

"You haven't been around lately, Dan—six months since I've seen you," he said genially, picking up a half-smoked cigar and lighting it. "Been busy?"

"Rather; out of town on the La Rue case most of the time."

"Yes, I remember; very nice bit of work—very. Well, I suppose your call is not merely a social one—they never are. What can I do for you?"

His eyes rested on Wayne, and Stiles hastened to present his companion.

"This is Stuart Wayne, the novelist," he said quietly, "and he has a story that ought to interest you."

"Wayne—hey? I've heard of him, of course, although I'm not reading much fiction. It's rather out of my line," and Dermott laughed gruffly. "I hope it is not one of your plots you are trying to put over on the

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department—we have troubles enough of our own.”

“If my bones are any proof of its reality, Bill,” put in Stiles before the other could answer, “this is far away from being fiction. The fact is I’ve been tied up in a cellar for the last ten hours, because I accidentally became mixed up in the affair. Tell him about it from the beginning, Wayne.”

The young author did so, simply and effectively, the chief exhibiting his interest by leaning forward across the desk, his eyes never leaving the speaker’s face. Not once did he interrupt, or interject any remark, but his teeth bit sharply into the stub of his cigar. As Wayne ceased speaking his glance wandered toward Stiles, who sat silent.

“And this is straight, Dan?”

“Absolutely, so far as I know.”

“Rather odd combination. I don’t remember these people; how did you get mixed up in the affair?”

Stiles explained briefly, and when he had concluded, Dermott, without further expressing himself, rang an electric bell.

“Is Corcoran out there?” he asked of the attendant who appeared. “He is? Have him step in here.”

A tall, slender man entered, and stood soberly beside the desk, hat in hand, his gaze quickly taking in all present.

“Sam said you wanted me, sir.”

“Yes, Corcoran; do you know a roughneck by the name of Cowan—Dave Cowan? A big fellow; has done some prize-fighting, I understand.”

Corcoran stood silent, his eyes on the wall, evidently communing with his memory.

"No, sir," he said slowly. "I've known several Cowans, but none like that."

"Nor Steve Groggin, either a sneak-thief or barroom tough?"

"Never did, sir."

"How about a woman named Nell Brennon?"

Corcoran's thin lips smiled.

"Ah, I got her mapped; but she ain't in town, or at least wasn't three weeks ago. You must know her, Mr. Stiles—she was mixed up in the Maxwell case."

"Yes," admitted Stiles, "but we got nothing on her, and I never did know what gang she ran with. What do you know about her?"

"Well, 'tain't much, when it comes to that," confessed Corcoran. "We never did have our hooks on her in this town. She always played pretty safe, but I've known about her for maybe ten years. She married Ike Hartigan—"

"Who?" exclaimed Wayne.

"Ike Hartigan," and Corcoran looked curiously at his interrogator. "His dad was the king gambler of this town years ago, and got bumped off in a row over a game.

"Ike ran a saloon for a while on Randolph, a pretty tough joint, believe me. A fellow got croaked there one night, and Ike skipped out. You remember that, chief?"

"Yes," assented Dermott. "We never had anything on him, but he thought we did—where was it he went to?"

"El Paso; running guns across the border, the last I heard. Davis wrote me about him a year ago—but I didn't want him for anything. Come to think about it,

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chief, your description of this guy Cowan wouldn't be such a bad fit for Ike—he is a big fellow, and did put on the mitts occasionally."

"I believe, Dermott, we've hit the trail," said Stiles earnestly. "The affair of last night took place in the old Hartigan house, although Wayne did not mention that; and the Mexican picked up his assistants in El Paso. It all dovetails in, so far, with the girl's statement that Nell was the wife of Cowan.

"Hartigan was afraid to come back to Chicago under his own name. Now, Corcoran, where would he be most likely to go to find another hide-out? Who were his cronies in this town?"

The detective scratched his ear, evidently puzzled.

"Fact is, Mr. Stiles, I don't just know," he admitted regretfully. "That gang what used to hang out along Randolph ten years ago—there ain't many left of 'em. Leastwise they are badly scattered—either in the pen, or skipped out.

"I'd have to scout around a bit among some of the old boys before I could answer that question. If I had a day or two, chief, I might be able to get a line on this guy; I'd know him all right once I got my lamps on him."

"What's your detail now?"

"Doin' the pawn-shops on the Casebeer robbery, sir."

"Let Acton take that up, and you see what you can find out about Hartigan. Some of his old partners here will know about him; 'tisin't likely he's been around town for several weeks without bumping up against some guy who knows him. Report to me again at five o'clock."

"Yes, sir."

As he disappeared Dermott turned to the others.

"Corcoran will find your man for you, if any one can," he said genially. "He's better than any dog on a trail. I'll call you up, Dan, as soon as he has anything to report. Am glad to have met you, Mr. Wayne—and I may read one of your books some time."

Neither man spoke as they descended in the elevator to the ground floor, but on the La Salle Street steps Wayne felt impelled to ask a question.

"What do you really think about this, Dan? Will he locate Cowan?"

"Frankly, I don't believe he will," Stiles answered gravely. "He looks to me like the ordinary fat-head, without an ounce of brains. Hartigan—for no doubt that is who Cowan is—believes he's wanted in this town for murder. Nothing but a big job would ever have brought him back here at all.

"But once here, and with that kind of a job on his hands, he isn't likely to hunt up his old crowd, and run around with them. Any fool would know better than that. Corcoran can beat Randolph from now till doomsday, and never see our man."

"Where do you think he is?"

"If I knew I'd go there; but my idea is that right now, after what happened last night, he is hid away in the quietest hole he can find in town—the last place we'd suspect—under some other name. It'll be a week before he puts his nose out-doors, unless he has to."

"But, Dan, the girl! I cannot forget her; or remain idle while she is in the hands of that gang."

Stiles lit a cigar, his gaze wandering up and down the crowded street.

"They are not going to hurt her, Wayne," he said finally. "That's no part of their game, judging from

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what you've told me. All they want is to keep her hidden away while they play out their hand.

"Of course they might kill her if it got too hot, but that's no part of their scheme. I wouldn't put anything like that past them, if they believed it necessary—but, right now, they don't.

"So I wouldn't worry about her at present. I am going home, get some sleep, and think it all over myself. That is the only way I can untangle a mix-up like this.

"My idea right now is that the proper end to start at will be grandfather. Once we get him picked, we'll be in shape to block Mr. Mexican before he can shoot. There is nothing more to be done now, that's certain; after a rest and a bath we will both think clearer.

"Look me up about six o'clock—you know my rooms. We'll have Corcoran's report by then, and, perhaps, can figure out something definite."

CHAPTER X

FACING ANOTHER TRAGEDY

Wayne finally fell into an uneasy sleep, waking in the neighborhood of four o'clock, conscious of a dull pain in his head. A bath and change of clothing remedied this, however, but his every thought centered about Zaida Grayson.

Could it be that she was held for ransom? Was that the conspiracy? No other theory appeared so reasonable, considering all the circumstances; and yet on what supposition did Almerido base his hopes? The Mexican's decision to make the girl prisoner had been suddenly taken; it must have originated through some discovery made in that looted home in Mexico.

Yet surely he would never have deserted Villa, and embarked on so desperate an enterprise without some assurance of success. What assurance did he have? How had he convinced Hartigan that the reward would warrant his risking his neck in Chicago once more?

The answer must be found in some letter written to Grayson by the unknown grandfather—perhaps in some legal document, of the existence of which the girl was not aware. Perhaps Hartigan had been persuaded to take a hand through some knowledge he possessed as to the older man's wealth and mode of life.

Wayne felt confident that Zaida had told him all she knew; that not one word had reached her revealing

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the true purpose of the men. She had been silenced by threat, and kept from any possible contact with others outside the gang.

The only communication she had ventured to send forth had reached him with its pitiful appeal. Now, no doubt, she was in worse stress than ever—more closely guarded and concealed.

If he only knew that *that* was all. The argument of Stiles had not wholly convinced. Of course, if this should prove a mere case of abduction, it would not be to the interest of the fellows to do injury to their prisoner. Her greatest danger would lie in an attempt to escape; or if others made an effort to aid her.

Yet she might receive no too kind treatment; even torture might be resorted to in compelling her to do their will. No form of cruelty would be impossible to Almerido, and the fellow called Cowan was a bestial brute.

And then, if ransom was not the real purpose—and it was not clear that it was—and these ruffians had concocted a more despicable scheme, involving, if need be, even murder to attain their ends—what might that mean to her?

His heart seemed to stop beating as a possibility occurred to his mind. Suppose their plan was to have her impersonated by another—that girl Dora, it might be. Bold as such a project would be, it was still not altogether beyond the possibility of crime. Indeed, in this case it promised a measure of safety.

The longer Wayne thought over the situation, the stronger became his conviction, that this was their purpose. Almerido had learned in some way that Zaida would inherit her grandfather's wealth in case of his

death. In spite of the old man's hatred and dislike of his son-in-law, he had made a will in favor of the granddaughter.

Grayson must have had papers in his possession, showing this fact, either from his own lawyer or in the form of a letter from the older man. He had kept this a secret, never revealing it to the girl—but the Mexican had found it after the other's death.

Instantly his evil mind had conceived the scheme, and every circumstance, as he gradually learned the truth from Zaida's story, increased his faith in its possibility of execution. He played for stakes large enough to justify the risk; if, indeed, there were risks.

The grandfather had not seen the grandchild since childhood; his memory of her would not be clear—any fair substitute, possessing quick wit and such knowledge as could be easily extracted from conversation with the real person, should be able to impersonate her sufficiently well to pass muster. The trial would not be particularly difficult—the right age, a general resemblance, a well-told story and a few recollections of the past ought to do the trick.

The old man would have no suspicions; and there was no one else to question the genuineness of the impostor. He would need help, of course, but that ought not be hard to obtain—El Paso was seething with desperate characters, who would be willing to sell their very souls for half what he could offer if his plan met with success; indeed, in all probability the fellow knew, even as the project took shape in his brain, exactly where he would find the assistance needed.

The very simplicity of it gave him courage. Why, it could not fail. All they needed to do was guard the

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girl, keep her entirely out of sight and hearing; while the other, made over in every possible way in her resemblance, played the assigned part, until the old man died.

Until he died!

Wayne shivered as these words echoed in his mind. Would they wait for that to occur? Wait for nature to take its slow course?

There came back to him a sharp memory of Cowan's brutal boast relative to the mysterious Dora, and her mission, that "it would have to be pulled quick or she'd explode."

Pulled quick! There was only one way to pull it quick; and, if his theory of their purpose was correct, only one meaning to such a remark—the death of the victim. And after that, what of Zaida? Following so cold-blooded a crime, would they dare permit her to live, to come forward later and rob them of their ill-gotten loot?

It seemed scarcely possible, for while she lived no one of them would be safe. They could not hold her perpetually under guard; yet, if her death also was a part of their program, why was she being spared now? Unknown, unfriended as the girl was in the world, it would be far safer for them to put her immediately out of the way, than to keep her a prisoner as they were doing.

It would have been a comparatively easy matter to dispose of her in the deserted Hartigan house, and destroy all evidence of her existence—yet she had been spared, protected, and taken away with them when they fled. Surely the preservation of her life was not through any fear of the crime, for there had been no hesitancy to murder, where it would serve their purpose.

They had deliberately left him to die, no doubt believed him already dead in that foul basement; they had deserted Stiles to perish miserably in his bonds of starvation.

What then was the cause of this mercy shown Zaida Grayson? Only one reason was apparent to Wayne's mind—they still had some part for the girl to play; if she was spared it was to serve their own ends. After that they would save themselves at any cost of life.

The clearness of this reasoning left Wayne half-mad with the feeling of helplessness. Nowhere was there a loop-hole through which he could burst. If he only had not been such a blind fool as to have overlooked the one important thing—the name of that unfortunate man whose very life was at stake.

It was this oversight alone which completely blocked any attempt at either warning or rescue. As it was they stood staring helplessly at a blank wall. To be sure, even this was a problem that might be solved with time—but time was the very essence of the case.

Somewhere, with patience and cunning, they were bound to discover some one who in other days had known Grayson, and the name of the woman he married; but in the meantime—what? While they were delving after this essential fact all would be over; they might be gazing into the faces of the dead.

Even to-morrow could be too late—aye, even to-day the crime might be committed, the perpetrators safely hidden from pursuit. His hand trembled as he took out his watch. It was nearly six; he would seek Stiles, and learn if there was any news.

He felt incapable longer of facing this horror alone.

Wayne caught a cross-town car, so deeply immersed

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in his own gloomy thoughts as to be indifferent to his surroundings. The man sitting next him held an evening paper open. So he could not escape reading the sensational head-lines, although the words scarcely made any real impression on his mind at the time. Later they returned in glaring lettering to memory.

MUNITION FACTORY FIRE.

Disastrous Blaze Started by Bombs. Believed
Incendiary.

Continental Factory Company Victim. Government
Agent on Scene.

Stiles's apartments were near the lake, in a large brown-stone edifice, devoted to the housing of bachelors of ample means. A young, smooth-faced individual, evidently a valet, responded to Wayne's ring, holding the door partially open as he cautiously appraised the visitor.

"No, sir, Mr. Stiles is not in; he has been gone some hours. I could not tell you when he will return; no, sir, he left no word."

He hesitated; breathing softly.

"May I ask, sir, if you are Mr. Wayne?"

"I am Stuart Wayne."

"Exactly, sir, if you will step inside, sir—thank you. There is a note for you on the study-table—yes, sir, the first door."

He hung about deferentially, all suspicion gone, but Wayne gave him no further thought as he tore open the sealed envelope and hastily perused the few lines. They

merely related to Stiles's absence, to examine into the facts of a mysterious fire on the North Side, in which the plant of the Continental Factory Company, engaged in making munitions for the British government, had been almost completely destroyed.

The blaze was believed to be incendiary. Would Wayne wait in his rooms until Dermott reported? He himself would probably return early in the evening.

Wayne lifted his eyes from the note, and encountered those of the valet.

"What is your name?"

"Simpson, sir."

"Well, Simpson, Mr. Stiles writes me that he will be back early in the evening, and I am to wait for him here."

"Very well, sir; is there any thing I can do?"

"Yes; if he is called by phone from the City Hall, I will take the message. Have you an evening paper? Thanks. I presume these are Stiles's cigars; I'll help myself."

"Is that all, sir?"

"I think so; if I want anything else I'll call."

Wayne read the evening news, and walked the floor, too nervous and miserable to remain quiet, yet unable to conceive of any possible thing he could accomplish elsewhere. The report of the fire was a mere fragment, containing no details, and did not interest him, and all other items of news appeared unusually commonplace. Not for one instant could he divorce his mind from Zaida Grayson, or this peculiar tragedy of crime into which he had been so unexpectedly thrown.

Dermott called up finally, just as he was leaving the office, but his man had obtained no information of value.

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Corcoran had made the rounds of Hartigan's old haunts, and interviewed some of his former cronies. None of these admitted any knowledge of his return to the city—he had not been seen or heard from in years.

The detective was about convinced that he and Cowan were not the same person, but would pursue his investigation further in the morning. Wayne banged up the receiver in disgust, and stared out through the darkened window into the street, savagely chewing his cigar. The wooden-headed fool! The only result of such futile efforts would be to advertise broadcast that the fellow was being sought by the police.

If Cowan had a real friend left in town, the warning would be taken to him, and he would lie tighter than ever in his hole. The best thing to do would be to call Corcoran off before he ruined everything by such clumsy methods.

Stiles came in a little after eight, hungry and with his clothes spattered with water. His mind was occupied upon his new case, but he listened attentively enough to Wayne's theory, while eating hastily, saying little himself until the latter reached a conclusion.

"I am afraid you have the dope about as it is, Wayne," he admitted gravely. "I lay here and thought it all over myself, after I first came in.

"There is no other scheme which fits so exactly into the known facts. I am just as interested in solving this mystery as you are—or nearly so, at least, for I have never seen the young lady—as this fellow Cowan, or Hartigan, tried his best to shuffle me off, and I'd certainly like to get my hands on him.

"Corcoran has begun at the wrong end—the police generally do; all they count on is bull-headed luck."

"How would you proceed?"

"First, locate the grandfather. Once you reach him you block the entire game. Of course, that might not save the girl, and then again it might. Those fellows will hardly resort to murder unless it serves their end.

"They are more likely to turn her loose and skip. My idea is that if we find the victim we'll get our hands on the female who is pretending to be his granddaughter. If she proves to be the regular thing, she'll squeal to save herself—they're all yellow—and then we'll have Almerido and company fairly in the net."

"I understand that—but who is he?"

"There are ways to find that out. Search the marriage registers of twenty years ago. If that fails, as it probably will, for likely enough this was a runaway match, then make a house-to-house canvass along the North Shore. You're bound to pick up the trail eventually."

He paused, then continued:

"I hardly believe that will involve much work, Wayne, if it is done right. Whoever the man is, he was certainly an old resident; doubtless his house was built forty or fifty years ago.

"So it will not be far out—somewhere in the old district. I'd start in at Lake Shore Drive, and work north. I'll furnish a good man for that job, if you don't care to do it yourself."

"Are you going to be busy?"

"For a day or two—yes," and he lit a cigar, pushing back his chair from the table. "Come into the den, while we talk it over more confidentially."

He glanced over his shoulder.

"Simpson has been with me quite a while, but is un-

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duly curious at times, and gets on my nerves; we'll be alone in there."

He closed the door and sank comfortably back into a Morris chair. His face looked tired and worn in the bright light, but his eyes had lost none of their brilliancy.

"Take another cigar, Wayne. I'm suddenly up against an odd case myself. I haven't said anything about it yet, for I haven't figured it out in my own mind. However, I feel like talking about it to-night, and perhaps, being a novelist, you may advance some idea of value. You read about the Continental Factory fire?"

"I saw the evening paper; it had no details—merely suggested it might be a German plot."

"That was the talk, but I hardly believe there is anything to it. Incendiary, no doubt of that; and the plant was making shells for the English army. At first I thought that was the origin; but now I am looking for some other purpose. Did the paper speak of Cul-
lom's death?"

"In connection with the fire? No. Who was Cul-
lom?"

"Patrick Lloyd Cullom. What, man—you never heard of old 'Pig Iron' Cullom? He has been a famous character in this town for fifty years or more. The papers are always writing him up.

"Heaven only knows how many millions he's got, but he has interests in practically every iron and steel mill in the Middle West. The Continental Iron Factory was his principal plant here in Chicago. He was president of the company, and had an office out there.

"Well, he died during the fire; funny the papers didn't get hold of it, but probably they went to press

too early. When I got there they had picked up his body and laid the old man out on a sofa in his private office.

"They told me it was an accident. No one seemed to know exactly how it occurred. He was alone when the fire-alarm sounded, and apparently rushed out and started down the stairs. He must have fallen, for they found him lying in a heap at the bottom—dead. The top of his head was crushed where he struck the cement walk below."

"Nobody witnessed the accident?"

"Not a one, so far as I could learn; their interest was all concentrated on the fire."

"But what was there particularly strange about that, Dan?"

"Nothing; in fact I hardly gave it a thought at the time, for I had been sent to investigate the cause of the fire. There was some delay in getting an undertaker, and the body was still there when I came back to the office.

"A policeman I knew was guarding the door, and something impelled me to take a look at the body. I went in alone; the window curtains had been drawn, and it was quite dark inside; but I ran one up, and had plenty of light. I had met the old man several times, and rather liked him, in a way—he was gruff and eccentric, but square and a good fighter.

"Perhaps that memory caused me to smooth down his gray hair and rearrange the rumpled collar of his coat. Wayne—Patrick Cullom was murdered; he was a dead man before his body ever fell down those stairs."

CHAPTER XI

83 PARK GROVE AVENUE

Wayne started in surprise at these unexpected words, leaning forward to stare into Stiles's face.

"Murdered! Are you sure?"

"No; not absolutely sure. I had no time in which to make certain. I had hardly made the discovery which aroused my suspicions when some member of the dead man's family came into the room, and I felt bound to withdraw—one was an old woman, the other much younger; both seemed deeply affected."

"But what was it you found, Dan?"

"A slight puncture back of the ear, such as might have been made by a hatpin. Even the physician who had examined him had failed to notice it, which was not strange, as it was concealed by the hair. Only my attempt to rearrange the locks revealed its presence to me.

"Indeed, it could scarcely be perceived, but I noticed a slight swelling there, and examined rather closely to ascertain the cause. At first I supposed it a mere bruise received when he fell, and should have passed it off as that, but for a small amount of black, resinous substance that seemed foreign to a bruise.

"The amount of this was very small, merely such as might have been pressed off the pin, as it penetrated the flesh, but was thick and gummy; I had to pick it off with my thumb-nail, and its removal revealed the puncture."

"And you actually believe that was what caused Culom's death?"

"I have been a detective too long to actually believe anything until it is proved," Stiles said slowly, removing a tightly wrapped paper from his pocket, and beginning carefully to unfold it.

"But it is hard to account for that peculiar wound by any other theory. It never occurred through accident, nor had it anything to do with his fall. But there is much I fail to know yet—the depth of the wound, and whether the slender weapon pierced the brain; neither do I know what this gummy substance is. I am, first of all, going to have it analyzed by a chemist. Did you ever see anything like that?"

Wayne bent over and examined curiously the tiny speck lying on the paper—it was exactly as Stiles described, thick, gummy, dead black in color, and had a faint odor, barely perceptible to the nostril.

"What does it smell like—resin?"

"I could not determine; that might be it, although the odor is too faint for me to distinguish."

"You imagine it was some substance smeared on the pin—or whatever the weapon employed might have been—which congealed over the wound?"

"What else could it be, Wayne? What other theory will account for its presence?"

The younger man shook his head, his eyes still on the tiny black speck.

"It is certainly foreign to the wound," insisted Stiles. "And not caked blood. I have tried to think of every possible explanation, but am driven inexorably back to my earliest suspicion.

"Of course, I haven't said a word, and shall not until

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I learn what this peculiar substance is—but I am going to satisfy myself before Patrick Cullom is buried.”

He got up and walked restlessly about the room, smoking furiously.

“It is too late to-night, and I am dead tired; but the first thing to-morrow I propose taking this sample to the city physician for analysis. Of course, if it proves to be non-injurious, a mere natural result of such a wound, then my theory fails; for it might be possible that in falling Cullom had struck the point of a nail.

“Anyhow. I should have no proof of foul play—but I cannot get the other suspicion out of my mind. However, I am too tired and sleepy to even think straight.”

“Which means,” said Wayne, rising, “that you would thank me to depart. All right, Dan, although I doubt if I sleep at all. I cannot drive that poor girl from my mind.”

“Use your will-power, man. There is nothing you can hope to accomplish to-night, because you have no foundation whatever to work on. The very best service you can render her will be to rest yourself, and then to-morrow start out afresh on the lines of investigation I have indicated.

“There is no mystery in detective work, Wayne—it requires simply the exercise of thought, patience, and a fair amount of courage—a little luck, perhaps, but that is never to be counted on.

“I’ll help you all I can; but this investigation you had better make alone. Call me up in case of a discovery. Simpson, Mr. Wayne’s hat and stick.”

It was midnight when Wayne retired, and the hours until morning were restless ones, although they brought him a measure of sleep. He realized the truth of what

Stiles had said—the utter uselessness of blindly hoping to solve this mystery through mere good fortune. It must be dug out little by little, through routine work.

Whatever might occur to Zaida Grayson in the meanwhile, his only possible course of action lay through intelligent, patient effort. He could hope to serve her in no other way. Wayne was surprised at the depth of his own interest in the case; the strength of his determination to solve it.

He made no effort to analyze his feelings, nor did he even connect the extent of his aroused interest with the girl herself. He endeavored to detach her from his memory, and sought to view the case merely from a professional standpoint.

As a novelist it naturally interested and fascinated him; he felt compelled to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion. He argued this out in his own mind, yet deep down in his consciousness remained aware that a certain winsome face was ever before him. Try as he would, there was no banishing of the girl; no possibility of keeping her out of the picture. He had been interested in Stiles's story, and the strange circumstances involving the sudden death of Patrick Cullom, yet scarcely gave it another thought after he reached his own rooms.

His whole mind was so centered upon this earlier case, in which he already had a part, as to leave him indifferent to all others. He was himself part of a tragedy, a cog in the wheel of crime, and no outside incident could swerve him from duty. It was the appeal of Zaida Grayson's eyes, the trust expressed by her voice, which he could not escape; unfalteringly he must continue to serve her.

He began his day's work confidently, but ended it in

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disappointment. The examination of files in the marriage bureau at the city hall was utterly fruitless. He scanned the long list of names running back thirty years, but found no Grayson among them.

Evidently, as Stiles had surmised, the couple had been married outside the city, a runaway match. Nothing remained for him to do but to patiently canvass the residential district along the Lake front. He dreaded the unpleasant task, but, having put his hand to the plow, had no intention now of turning back. And he meant to do it himself, for in no other way would he be satisfied of its thoroughness.

He had dinner alone at the club, glancing over the evening paper as he waited to be served. The principal item of interest was the death of Patrick Cullom, and the probable distribution of his millions. The death was treated as an accident, no reference being made to possible foul play, so evidently Stiles's mysterious black substance had proved of no moment.

Wayne merely glanced over the account, hastily, after ascertaining this silence, feeling small concern, bearing away with him a jumbled list of large investments, and a will of numerous bequests, largely to religious institutions, outside of a few immediate relatives. He saw in these nothing of interest, but at the close of his meal called up Stiles, thinking he might have another report from Corcoran.

Simpson answered, with the statement that his master had been out all day, and had not returned. No, he had no knowledge where Mr. Stiles was, or when he would be back; there had been no telephone message from the chief. Wayne possessed no real hope there would be, yet he hung up the receiver with a sense of discouragement.

There was nothing for him to do but to go home.

The deserted study was a lonely place, but he changed into a comfortable lounging-jacket, lit a cigar, and made an effort to resume work at the desk. To concentrate was impossible; a few lines, and the pencil dropped from his fingers—it seemed such poor, miserable work, this attempt to imagine, when he was actually confronted by such serious facts. A woman's very life depended on his action, and it was such a paltry thing to make his puppet characters perform, while she remained undefended, left alone to her fate.

The thought sickened him, filled his mind with disgust; his whole soul revolted at the task, and he pushed the pad of paper back out of sight. He was seated there motionless, staring at the darkened window, seeing against the black pane the dim outlines of a face, when the telephone bell rang.

Stiles, no doubt; it would be no one else at this hour. He placed the receiver at his ear expectantly.

"This is Stuart Wayne."

"How fortunate to find you," said a voice, plainly audible, and instantly sending through him a tingle of recollection. "You may not recognize my voice; I am Zaida Grayson."

"But I did recognize it," he hastened to assure her. "I have been searching for you all day. Where are you?"

"I may tell you that later," she answered; "but first I must speak to you of something else. I am grateful for your interest, Mr. Wayne, but it is useless to search for me. You know enough to be aware that I dare not converse with you freely over the wire?"

"I can, at least, imagine that may be true."

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"It is true. Yet I must see you and talk with you. It is necessary for us both that I explain fully; you are yourself in danger unless I do this, and I cannot bear that thought. Will you come to me, alone, telling no one else, trusting entirely to my pledge of safety?"

"I certainly will."

"You must accept my word blindly," she went on, a little catch in the voice; "for I can tell you no more until we are together. Any failure on your part would be a very serious mistake."

"There shall be none; I will do exactly as you say. I do not even question you."

"Which is very nice of you. Come to-night, alone, to 83 Park Grove Avenue; it is a short street running east from State to the lake, and you can make no error—a large stone house."

"And you will see me alone?"

"Yes—alone."

"At what hour?"

"Immediately, if you are free. I shall expect you within an hour."

He tried to say something more, but the receiver at the other end had been returned to its hook, and there was no response. He came out of his trance, staring at the dumb instrument in his hand, a hundred swift thoughts surging through his brain.

While he heard her voice there was no doubt in his mind, no questioning. To go to her—to obey her summons—nothing could bring him greater pleasure; but with silence came wonderment and a sense of the weird strangeness of it all.

Yet it could not be a trick, a scheme to get him into

the hands of that unscrupulous gang, for unquestionably it was her voice he had just listened to. He could not be deceived as to that; no other voice would ever sound like hers to his ears. And he possessed infinite trust in her; in confidence he would place his life in her hands.

Strange as this request was, he had given her his pledge, and would redeem it. The question came, why should she have asked this—that he come alone; that he tell no friend of his mission? Indeed, why should she send for him at all?

But he brushed them all aside as unworthy, as cowardly, as unjust to her. He would go, let the result prove what it might; and he would go clean and in honor. There must be a reason for secrecy which would all be explained when they met.

So certain was he of this, so relieved at the outcome, so happy at the thought of meeting with her again, his spirits became boisterous and boyish. He whistled and sang as he dressed, eager to be on his way. The unexpectedness of the message awakened his imagination, and there was a kindly friendliness to the voice over the wire which stimulated.

He was to see her alone, and learn all; she had turned to him the moment she dared; she held him her friend in whom to confide. There remained no question of doubt in his mind when he left the room; all the audacity and courage of youth had come back—yet he retained sufficient judgment to slip an automatic pistol into his pocket, and leave a brief sealed note on his desk.

In spite of Zaida's cordial words and gentle voice over the phone, he could not blot out entirely the recollection of Almerido and Cowan; they still lurked in the

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background and might have to be reckoned with. It was as well to be prepared for any emergency.

It was a dark, gloomy night, and, by the time he reached the loop, a light drizzle was falling, making walking exceedingly disagreeable. He caught a North State Street car, and settled down into a corner seat, relying on the promise of the conductor to notify him when it was time to alight. That functionary, however, carried him a block beyond his destination, and he tramped back that distance in what had developed into a steady rain.

The streets were sodden and black, almost deserted of pedestrians even at that early hour. A belated delivery truck from some department-store passed, slushing through the pools of water standing on the pavement, and a policeman, his rubber coat glistening in the glare of the street lamp, walked along the opposite curb.

Wayne, with coat-collar upturned and face lowered to protect it from the rain, hurriedly turned into Park Grove avenue. It was a black cavern of a street, yet the houses on either side were of a solid, substantial kind, giving it an air of safe respectability. If any suspicion lingered in his mind that he might be spied upon, it was entirely dissipated by the certainty that no one moved along the block except himself.

There was no difficulty in locating the number he sought—the black lettering on the transom over the front door being plainly illuminated by a light burning within. The appearance of the house added immeasurably to his stock of courage, it was so evidently the abode of wealth, standing rather isolated from its neighbors in the protection of an immaculately trimmed hedge; a large square house of stone, having a wide veranda, with a carriage

drive at one side—just such a home as a man of means would erect in the seventies.

Wayne, as he paused an instant in the hedge shadow, partially protected from the rain, felt no doubt but this was the residence he had been seeking to trace. Zaida, unaided, must have escaped her captors and fled here for protection; sending for him the instant she felt free to do so.

How widely different from their other meeting this would prove! Eager to hear her story, he advanced boldly up the steps, and pushed the bell-button. A little man in blue livery and silver buttons opened the door, bowing silently as Wayne mentioned his name, indicating his entry.

The door closed, and he found himself standing in a wide hall, plainly but handsomely furnished. The little man bowed again, his hand waving Wayne to the left.

"Miss Grayson will be down presently, sir," he said. "If you will wait in the drawing-room I will inform her of your presence. Yes, sir, certainly—your coat, sir."

It was a large, imposing apartment that Wayne entered, richly carpeted in the old style, the furniture massive, the windows heavily draped. A glittering chandelier hung from the center ceiling, but only two globes emitted light, yielding a dim, cathedral illumination to the room, in which nothing appeared distinct.

Indeed, the young man advanced almost to the open fireplace, in which there was a dull glow of coals, staring curiously about him at the great variety of pictures decorating the walls, before becoming aware that he was not alone.

He heard the steps of the doorman ascend the stairs, and then suddenly a vaguely revealed figure arose from

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a sofa and stood, bowing politely, under the softened ray of light.

“Señor Wayne, I make eet to be,” a familiar voice said in broken English. “I make eet ze introduction—I, Juan Almerido.”

CHAPTER XII

A STRANGE COINCIDENCE

Wayne stood straight, looking at the fellow, ignoring his extended hand. He felt himself deceived, trapped, yet after the first sharp thrill of nerves he steadied into cool determination. They might have him in their power—these demons—but there would be no surrender without a fight.

His eyes wandered suspiciously about the room, suspecting instantly the presence of others, but quickly returned to the face of the smiling Mexican, reassured that they were alone. The smile of the other became a sarcastic grin, revealing a row of white teeth beneath his black mustache.

"The *señor* doubts?" he lisped sardonically, his hand returning to his side. "Perhaps eet ees not strange; yet eet ees not war, but peace, I come to bring. Will ze *señor* be seated till I explain?"

Wayne hesitated, yet finally chose a chair, with back to the wall.

"Now that I am here, I may as well, Almerido," he said coldly. "But it might be best to tell you at the very start that I am armed, and you will be the first man shot if you try any treachery on me."

The Mexican spread his hands deprecatingly, his thin lips still retaining their fixed smile.

"As you will, *señor*," he said, and reseated himself

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on the sofa. "I am alone, unarmed, yet fear nothing. To keel me would be murder, and ze Americans does eet not. You come to learn ze truth—iss eet not so?"

"I came to meet Miss Zaida Grayson, at her invitation."

"*Si*, 'tis so; otherwise you not come. So I know; for zat reason she call you—ze *señorita*. You shall see her, *señor*, presently—zat ees true. But first you see me, and I tell you much you need know before she come. You speak Spanish, *señor*?"

"Not a word."

"Eet ees to regret; ze English I not make clear. You will pardon. Ze *señorita* tell me of you, eet ees her wish I explain. To do so is pleasure, eet vill delight me.

"Why, you ask? Because I vud set you to zink right. You not a detective, she say; not a police—only you write books—ees eet not so?"

"Quite right; this is entirely out of my line."

"So eet vas tol' me; an' I believe. Zen I say, why we be enemy? He not understan'; if I tell heem all ze story eet will be best—vat? Zen zar be no more troubles; between us it all be friendly."

"You are decidedly mistaken," said Wayne in disgust. "No explanation on your part would accomplish that. I have seen and heard too much, Almerido, to be deceived by lies. Perhaps you will even deny the endeavor to kill me."

"Eet vos ze fight, *señor*. You ask nothing, but leap like a wil' cat. We knew not then the cause—only to defend. Not even do we know what eet vos ze *señorita* say to you to make hate."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Now ve learn zat. She make eet out zat ve steal her;

zat ve would rob. But eet ees not so, *señor*. See—zis ees her home to where we brought her; also I am here.”

Wayne laughed, but not pleasantly; he felt only scorn for the grimacing fool who imagined he would believe such rot.

“That, I presume, was why you deliberately left me, along with another, to die unaided in the basement?” he suggested coldly.

“Eet wus at first fright,” admitted the Mexican, in no way abashed. “Ve only thought to get away. Ve thought maybe you die an’ ve be arrest. But I come back an’ find you gone—both gone.”

“Exactly; and now you imagine a few soft words will straighten the matter all out, so we will make no more trouble. Why don’t you send for the other man?”

“We know heem not—his name—zat vas vhy.”

“How did you learn mine, with my address?”

“Ze lady tell us zat; soon as she understan’ she tell us.”

“Well, Almerido,” said Wayne sternly, after a pause, “you are shooting into the air. I am on the fight, and you may as well know it. I wouldn’t believe you under oath.”

“But you believe *Señorita Grayson*?”

“Yes, I’d believe her, if she told me—alone.”

“She tell you alone; she tell you just as I tell—every word. She know it all now. You vait, *señor*, an’ hear from her lips ze truth. Ah, now she come.”

Wayne dared not turn his back on the man, but was aware of the soft swish of skirts on the stair and the light tread of feet across the carpet. Then she stood before him, in full glow of the light.

Both men arose, and she acknowledged their greeting,

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extending a hand to Wayne. Her face was white, yet her eyes met his inquiring glance with frankness and a smile of welcome.

"I am very glad to receive you in my own home, Mr. Wayne," she said graciously, "and it was kind of you to respond so quickly."

"Your own home? Then this is your home?"

"Why, of course. Has not Señor Almerido explained?"

"He has told me a strange tale, one I could not accept as true," Wayne admitted, greatly puzzled. "Perhaps you can give it an appearance of reality; but, pardon me, I would greatly prefer talking with you alone."

"A favor easily granted. *Señor*, you may retire."

"*Si, señorita.*"

The Mexican bowed again, his dark eyes searching the face of each, but without a murmur of dissent he backed out through the door at his right and instantly disappeared. Wayne breathed more easily, turning to again confront the girl, who now stood silent, her eyes downcast upon the carpet.

No sound disturbed the oppressive stillness; it was as though they were entirely alone in the house. Yet he did not feel free, unwatched, hesitating to speak the words trembling on his lips. She must have felt her embarrassment, for her voice first broke the silence between them.

"You were naturally surprised at my message?"

"Could it be otherwise?" he retorted wonderingly. "I left you helpless in the hands of a gang of ruffians, seemingly capable of any crime, and have vainly sought ever since to trace you by every means in my power. Then suddenly you call me to come to you."

"I come, and find you in a home of luxury, apparently free and independent, possessing no longer fear of those men from whose presence you shrank in terror two days ago. I cannot comprehend the change; it is so sudden and unexpected."

"It is natural you should wonder, Mr. Wayne," she said; and he noticed, as she lifted her eyes, how sunken they were, and that lines of pain marked her mouth. "But things were not as I pictured them to you before."

"Do not think I attempted to deceive; I was myself mistaken, and sent for you to-night so that I might explain. I—I do not wish you to think ill of me."

"I pledge you my word."

"Which I accept gladly. It seems that Señor Almerido has been actuated only by friendly motives. He has made it clear to me, now that his plans have proved successful. He felt as I did, that this should be told you—"

"Almerido advised this conference with me?"

"Only after I suggested it; he agreed it might be best."

"Then it was through you he learned of my identity, of my interest in serving you?"

"Yes; I confessed it all. I could not do otherwise after becoming convinced of his friendliness."

Wayne was too dumfounded for speech; and she went on, talking as though she repeated words learned by rote, her voice almost expressionless, her eyes no longer frankly meeting his.

"It seems that the secrecy and the careful guarding of me was rendered necessary by two things—Señor Almerido's desertion from the Mexican army, and the fact, which he had discovered, that others were endeavoring

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to gain possession of my person, for reasons of their own.

"Señor Almerido was a friend of my father's, and was trusted by him. He had nothing to do with his death, but arrived in time to drive the murderers away, and to listen to his last words. His only efforts since have been to carry out my father's wishes."

"He tells you this?"

"Yes; he explained everything fully to me. My father, in his final moments, turned to him as a friend. He even gave him a letter from my grandfather, asking that we return to Chicago, and stating that I was his sole heir. I am convinced that Señor Almerido has been most honorable, most loyal to his friend."

Wayne could only stare into her averted face unconvinced, yet conscious that no words of his would change her position. His dislike of the Mexican made it impossible for him to believe such a statement; yet the very fact that the girl was actually here in her own home, and apparently mistress of it, left him unarmed and weaponless. He glanced uneasily about, feeling that they were not alone; that he was being spied upon.

"This is, then, the house of your grandfather?"

"Yes."

"But why did not Almerido bring you here at once? Why did he hold you prisoner at that other place so long?"

"He wanted to investigate, make sure. He was a stranger in a strange city, and besides believed he was being followed."

"He could have told you the truth."

"Yes, that was a mistake; but it seems he thought I understood; he supposed I had read the letter and knew

his purpose. He was very much surprised to learn of my fear, and—and that I had written that note appealing for help.”

“It was to tell me this which caused you to send for me to-night? You believed I would still be searching, and desired that I make no further effort?”

Her eyes met his once more, and he wished he could read the expression in their depths; something lurked there he could not decipher.

“I wanted no misunderstanding between us,” she confessed hesitatingly. “It was all my fault, and I felt it my duty to explain. That was all—but—but I am not quite willing to renounce our friendship.”

“Is there any cause? You must comprehend surely that my desire to serve you has been an unselfish one. Our meeting has been unusual, yet that can be forgotten. Am I to feel that I am welcome?”

“Always.”

“Señor Almerido—he remains here?”

“Not long; I desire to reimburse him for his expense and time; it is then his wish to return to Mexico.”

“And the others?”

“I do not know what has become of them, Mr. Wayne. After Señor Almerido explained all this to me he brought me here alone, and I have not seen them since.”

Wayne lingered, far from satisfied with the situation, still haunted by the feeling that he was being watched, and half convinced that the girl merely repeated a lesson she had learned to recite. There was a constraint between them, unfelt at the time of their first meeting; their conversation became difficult to sustain. It was as though she was on guard, ready to parry any stroke, expectant of attack.

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He let things drift, yet not without an effort to learn more—aware that this was not the Zaida Grayson he had anticipated meeting, but a stranger who was hiding some secret, who was deliberately deceiving him for some purpose of her own. At last, despairing of penetrating this reserve, he arose to say good night, anxious to be outside with his own thoughts.

She walked with him into the dimly lighted hall in silence, her eyes downcast. Only when he stood ready to go did she permit impulse to overcome caution, frankly extending her hand.

"I am so sorry," she said regretfully, "you do not understand, you do not believe. I—I want so much for us to remain friends."

He smiled almost for the first time, his hand warmly clasping the extended fingers.

"We shall be," he replied earnestly. "Perhaps I will figure this all out when I get by myself; just now it seems vague and unreal. When I do succeed in convincing myself, may I come again?"

"I shall always be very glad to receive you."

The answer was so earnest and sincere, the uplifted eyes so full of invitation, that the man could scarcely restrain his impulse to urge her to tell him all; but even as the words trembled on his lips he became aware of the opening of a door at the end of the hallway, and the unwelcome appearance of Almerido. The Mexican advanced into the full light, his ugly face wearing a smile, and Wayne released the hand in his grasp and straightened stiffly, angered by the intrusion.

"Ze lady explain, *señor*? She tell all?" the newcomer asked, his teeth gleaming. "You no doubt more—ah, I see 'tis so!"

"Miss Grayson has repeated the story as you told it to her," said Wayne coldly, his eyes hostile.

"But you not satisfy? You not believe?"

"Oh, yes; of course I accept the word of the lady, Almerido. The object you have in view is attained, and I shall no longer interfere with your plans. In fact, I do not care for any further conversation with you. Good night, Miss Zaida—I shall not forget your promise."

He closed the door in Almerido's face, as the latter started forward, uttering an ejaculation in Spanish; but his last glimpse was into the eyes of the girl—there he saw the same look of piteous appeal once noticed before.

The rain had decreased to a drizzle, yet the weather made no impression upon him as he descended the steps and regained the street.

He glanced back at the house, the light in the hall winking out as he lingered; then, turning up the collar of his coat, he walked away through the puddles of water. The story told had not been convincing. He could not openly question it; could not determine in his own mind wherein its weakness lay—but he could not persuade himself that she had told him all.

He believed that Almerido had overheard every word exchanged between them; that the girl knew this, and dared not speak freely; that she merely repeated what she had been instructed to say. That last look of appeal in her eyes had more weight with him than all her words.

He could not reconcile them, nor could he reconcile her being in this home of wealth with her former position at Hartigan's. The mystery had thickened, rather than dissolved—he was left more in the dark than ever.

Of course, it was easy to comprehend the purpose of

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the Mexican in such a tale; in his having it repeated by the lips of the girl. He hoped thus to get him off the trail. He preferred to deceive rather than kill—no doubt it was more in his line.

But what pressure could have been exerted on Zaida to cause her to become his accomplice? Did she really believe, or was she also acting a part?

Wayne's sole desire was to confer with Stiles and be guided by his judgment.

It was not late, and he found the latter still up, puzzling over some papers at his desk. Stiles listened patiently, his face expressionless, making no interruption as Wayne repeated word by word what had transpired. As the younger man concluded, he removed his crossed feet from the desk and deliberately lit a cigar.

"Where did you say all this happened?" he asked curiously.

"83 Park Grove Avenue."

"Well, Wayne," said the detective, and laid his hand on the other's knee, "you have done a good job to-night unconsciously. We have found grandfather. 83 Park Grove Avenue was the residence of Patrick Lloyd Cul-lom. See, I have it written down in this note-book."

CHAPTER XIII

PLANNING A MAN-HUNT

Wayne straightened up rigid in his chair, gazing incredulously at the smiling face before him.

"Cullom!" he gasped. "The man you told me about? The one who died in the fire?"

"The same; I just looked him up in the telephone book, intending to call there early to-morrow."

"Do you mean that old Pat Cullom's residence was 83 Park Grove Avenue?"

"I mean just that, Wayne. Strange as it seems, it is nevertheless a fact. You've stumbled onto a mighty important bit of information to-night, my boy.

"The whole affair is beginning to dove-tail, so as to give us a glimpse of cause and effect. It bears already the earmarks of a dirty case, but your discovery puts me in a fair way to solve it. That must have been the very girl who came heavily veiled into the office yesterday, weeping over her grandfather."

"You saw her?"

"Not her face. I simply passed the two as I went out, and she did not lift her veil; but, without doubt, it was she."

"But, Dan, why do you think so? Surely there can be no reason to believe that Zaida Grayson is mixed up in this crime—if there is a crime?"

Stiles got to his feet, and paced the room, smoking furiously.

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"There is a crime, all right," he insisted, "and a fiendish one. I have evidence enough already to establish that—but no more. Cullom was killed; deliberately murdered, and the fire was merely a screen behind which the assassin worked.

"It was all carefully planned beforehand, and so well executed as to leave no clew. Only the accident of my rearranging the dead man's hair awoke my suspicions. Now I have verified them."

"In what way?"

"A chemical examination of that peculiar black, gummy substance, detached from the mouth of the wound I told you about. I could not swear that the wound would kill, or even that it was a wound inflicted by the blow of another. But the gum furnishes proof—it was a deadly poison."

"Where was it analyzed?"

"First at headquarters; then in the laboratory of the University of Chicago. There is the report on the desk."

Wayne looked at the card indicated, but made no motion to pick it up. He felt dazed and faint, unable to think clearly.

"What—what was the poison?" he asked.

"Curare; scarcely known at all in this country. It is an arrow poison used by the Indians of Central and South America. They tell me it has little or no effect if taken into the mouth, but when injected into a wound is immediately fatal.

"That was what killed Patrick Cullom; he was dead before he took the fall."

"But who did it?"

"I do not know—yet. Up to the time you told me

that story I had not the slightest idea. I had discovered no motive, and found no trace.

"Now, the very nature of the poison leads me to suspect that Mexican, Almerido. At least, I shall work on that theory."

Wayne walked over to the window and stared gloomily out into the night. Stiles, seated on one corner of the desk, dangled his legs, and watched him.

"Stuart," he said finally, in a changed voice, "I am beginning to understand that this hits you a bit hard. It's true, isn't it, old man, that you are interested more than usual in this girl?"

Wayne wheeled about, intending to utter a quick denial, but changed his mind suddenly.

"I hardly know, Dan," he admitted hesitatingly. "She attracts me, but—but not seriously."

"Everything has to have a beginning. We will not quarrel over that. Well, now, she may have nothing whatever to do with this affair; she may be as much of a victim as her grandfather. That is for us to find out.

"I confess I don't exactly like this last occurrence, or her part in it. In my judgment she lied to you, deliberately and for a purpose. Yet we do not at present know what that purpose might be. She might have been driven to it in the hope of thus saving you from some personal injury."

"Saving me? Why should you think that could have been her object?"

"To me it looks rather plausible," said Stiles slowly, nursing his knee. "Through her these fellows had learned who you were, and how you had become involved in the case. They naturally believed she would have influence with you.

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"Suppose they threatened to kill you unless she consented to convince you with her own lips that all was right. Is it not probable that she would consent? If she felt one-half the interest in you that you exhibit in her, she certainly would.

"Perhaps, if you had not unconsciously in your narrative dwelt on the strange look of appeal in the girl's eyes; and the feeling you had that you were being watched and spied upon, this explanation might not have occurred to me with any force. Naturally I'd believe her in full cahoots with the gang."

"But now you also have faith in her honesty?" broke in Wayne eagerly.

"Not beyond question—no. I am a detective, Wayne, and my suspicions never sleep. An innocent face is no proof of virtue to my mind. But, if it is any comfort to you, my boy, I will say this—while you told your story I struck a new line of thought, which may prove the truth. Let us start with this theory; that she is straight; but absolutely in the power of these men; they have frightened her by threatening you.

"She already knows they are desperate enough to do anything. Under these conditions she is driven to tell you a falsehood in the hope of thus saving your life. If she did so agree, doubtless it was done with a mental reservation—she believed this meeting would afford her an opportunity to whisper a word of warning in your ear."

"She found no such chance!"

"No; that was what brought the look of anguish into her eyes. She knew, more certainly even than you, that all your conversation was overheard; she had to act out her part. If this is all true, she believed when you went

out the door that you were going to your death."

"To death!" echoed Wayne in astonishment.

"Perhaps it may not have occurred to her that way. She may not realize the desperate character of these men, or how deeply they are involved in crime.

"Probably she has no knowledge that her grandfather was murdered; so it may be possible that she believed her lie would save you from attack.

"But frankly, Wayne, I have no such faith. Those fellows will not take any such chance. They believe themselves absolutely safe, except for you; and will never be satisfied until they close your lips for good and all.

"You are invited to that house to give Almerido an opportunity to see and talk with you—the girl, the explanation, was all sham. In my judgment you are marked for an accident."

Wayne remained silent, more than half convinced, and Stiles, watching his face, continued, after a pause.

"Not pleasant, of course, yet the result is not necessarily fatal," he said quietly. "I have passed through the same mill several times, and yet survive. Luckily one can guard against accident when warned in time.

"But, Wayne, this is no ordinary crime in which we have become involved; these are no common criminals. A human life means nothing if it stands in their way.

"Moreover, this affair has been planned in cold blood; every detail has been worked out beforehand; it has already resulted in murder; it involves a large sum of money, and will require a month or two yet before they can hope to actually get their hands on the cash.

"They dare not hesitate now, or take chances of any squeal; they have got to guard their getaway."

"Then Miss Grayson is still a prisoner?"

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"Unquestionably, unless we accept the other alternative, that she is one of them."

"Never, Dan! I'll not believe that under any circumstances!"

"Very good," smilingly. "Nor will I, until it is proved. It is highly probable they are making use of a double to represent her, and keeping her out of the way."

"A double? Some one resembling her?"

"Of course; that is not so uncommon. It is true, I believe, that no two people are exactly alike, but those strongly resembling others can be found rather easily. Once dressed alike, and so situated as to appear the same, they will deceive the ordinary observer, when suspicion is not aroused.

"I have played such parts, and escaped detection. In this case they did not even have to be very particular. Cullom had not seen his grandchild for years, nor had any one connected with his household—any resemblance, if the age was right, would answer. You spoke of a girl called Dora?"

"Yes, Miss Grayson said she was brought into her room for a few minutes."

"The Brennon woman brought her in; she had light hair and blue eyes, thus resembling Miss Grayson as you describe her. After a minute or two she used these words and went out: 'All to the good, Nell; I've got an eyeful; it's a cinch.'

"She's the double—Dora. It's remembering this which makes me confident your young lady is not in the gang. There would be no reason to use her, as she hasn't been in Chicago since she was fourteen."

"Then," insisted Wayne eagerly, "what remains to

be done but arrest these people at once? With her evidence the conspiracy can certainly be shown?"

"I am not sure as to that. Moral assurance is one thing, and legal evidence quite another. As things stand we have no proof; our only hope would lie in a confession from one of the outfit.

"Don't make the mistake, Wayne, of supposing these fellows haven't covered their trail. I believe they are old hands at this game—the Mexican is an astute villain, as cowardly as he is cold blooded; and I know Nell Brennon to be as slick as they make them.

"She slipped out of my hands once, and I don't mean to lose her again in the same way. I suppose you know Cullom is already buried?"

"No! To avoid an inquest?"

"Well, no time was lost. The coroner held an inquest, a mere formal affair, as usual. Nothing suspicious appeared, and the natural verdict was accidental death. I had no evidence to introduce at the time, so I let it go, supposing the body would be held for a day or so.

"Later I was surprised to learn that the dead man had been removed to an undertaker's establishment, a quiet funeral held, and burial made in the family plot at Calvary. Only a few persons were present."

Wayne drew a deep breath, his hands unconsciously clenched as he realized all that this meant.

"Knowing all this, how can you remain so calm and indifferent?" he cried angrily. "Why, it drives me mad to contemplate the position that girl is in.

"This is a deliberately planned, cold-blooded robbery. That murder was no accident; it was part of the scheme. It had to be; there was no other way of getting the money.

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"Then what about her, Dan? What will prevent these fiends from killing her as heartlessly as they did Cul-lom?"

"Nothing, if they deem it necessary. But that is the very reason why it is best for us to go slow. We must not permit them to know they are being trailed. I am not indifferent, or calm, except professionally; but my professional instincts tell me that there is no prospect of the girl being seriously injured until the estate is settled.

"In spite of her double they may need her for some purpose—just as they used her to deceive you to-night—and to put her out of the way at this stage of the game might be killing the goose laying the golden egg. Almerido is the brains of the gang, and is too smart for that.

"Her danger will come later, when they have the swag, and are trying to make a safe getaway. That Mexican is not the kind to leave a clew behind; he'll close the book."

"You have a plan? You have determined what to do?"

"Only to follow along those lines naturally opening before us," Stiles answered quietly. "Take a cigar, Wayne, and consider this matter calmly for a minute.

"You have two handicaps, my boy—your deep interest in the girl, and the fact that you are a novelist. To your mind any mystery of this nature, any obscure crime, is to be solved through some wonderful detective genius.

"Well, they never are; accidents have happened, remarkable deductions have been drawn, and very trivial things have cleared away blank mysteries. But mainly it is pure common sense, mixed largely with patience.

"Take this case, for instance; what do we know? A young woman has been secretly transported from Mexico to Chicago, and kept secluded by a gang of men and women, some of whom we know to be criminals. At the same time a man is found murdered in a peculiar manner, and we have some reason to believe the two acts are connected—form part of one crime.

"Yet at present we are utterly unable to establish this relationship. So far as I know there is not a clew to the perpetrator of the murder; I've sought for one in vain. Nothing is left us but patient grubbing. In this we possess certain advantages—"

"What, may I ask?"

"Well, we know the parties who we believe are involved, and where they are. We can watch their movements. You already possess the privilege of calling at the Cullom home; although I warn you, Wayne, you will be in more or less danger every moment you are there, and must keep your eyes open.

"Then I am not known to be in this case at all; I have neither been seen nor identified by any member of the gang. This fact leaves me free to prow! about as I please without arousing suspicion.

"Working independently of each other we are almost certain to run across lines in the case which will converge to some common end. In that way, little by little, we'll draw in the net, and land our fish. There is no other method of procedure—is there?"

"I am afraid not, Dan," admitted the younger man gloomily. "But I must know more from the lips of the girl; I must speak with her privately in some way."

"No doubt, it would be a great help if you could—even if it merely assured us that she was an innocent

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victim. Perhaps if you were to call unexpectedly, when Almerido was absent, you might get a private word with her—it is worth trying."

They discussed their plans for an hour, turning over and over every possible means of approach. By reason of long experience Stiles was prolific of suggestions, while Wayne, his interest thoroughly aroused in this man hunt, exhibited a reckless disregard of danger in the methods he suggested to solve the mystery.

His one thought was the release of Zaida Grayson, and with that end constantly in mind, rather lost sight of the murder of Cullom. But Stiles never lost sight of the main issue—the conviction of the criminals—and his insistence on caution finally prevailed over the younger man's impatience.

At last they arrived at a clear understanding of the first steps to be taken. Stiles was to return to the iron factory and go over again, inch by inch, every part of the plant, in search for some clew; he would question the employees in the office once more in hope of thus obtaining some hint of guidance.

If these efforts failed, nothing remained but to place a shadow over the Cullom house, and patiently wait developments. Meanwhile Wayne, armed and ready for treachery, was on some trumped-up pretext to call openly on Miss Grayson and endeavor to see her alone.

The chances were strong against the success of such an attempt, but the suggestion had fired Wayne's imagination to such an extent that he would consent to no other course, and finally the detective permitted him to try the experiment, satisfied that it could work no harm.

With this understanding the two parted for the night.

CHAPTER XIV

TRAPPED

Wayne awoke, after a restless night, with a clearer brain, but no less determination. During every wakeful moment the memory of Zaida Grayson had haunted him, and he now confessed to himself the deep impression the young girl had made upon him.

He would never yield to Stiles's suspicions, and he meant to clear her of any complicity in this case, at whatever cost to himself. Dan's very life made him doubtful of all humanity; besides, he had never met the girl. To him she was no more than a mere name; a name associated in his mind with a hideous crime.

But in the full memory of her face, the pleading appeal in her eyes, the story to which he had listened from her lips, the young man's faith in her innocence strengthened and became fixed. He would not doubt nor hesitate. The way would open before him, or else he would open it, and prove the truth to the world—that she was the helpless victim of scheming villainy.

Yet his mind was clearer in the morning than in the excitement of the previous evening. He gave calmer consideration to conditions. This mood constrained him to postpone his call until late in the afternoon—that time would seem more natural, and, besides, Almerido would be far more likely to be absent at that hour.

Yet the intensity of his interest would not permit his

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being idle, or remaining away from the neighborhood of the Cullom home. Indeed, it struck him as being an excellent idea to go out there and keep an eye on the house, so that, if the Mexican did by any chance depart on some mission, he might instantly take advantage of his absence. Of course he dare not be seen, yet surely there would be found some hiding-place from which, unnoticed, he might observe the neighborhood.

He slipped the automatic pistol he had carried the night before into his pocket and before ten o'clock was in a saloon on North State Street, the windows of which commanded a good view of its intersection with Park Grove Avenue, and had established a friendship with the bartender, enabling him to remain indefinitely with his face to the window.

Any closer inspection he felt would be unwise, yet no one could take the car for down-town without being observed. The only danger was the possibility of some one he sought to avoid entering the place.

Wayne leaned against the cigar-case, spent money freely, and conversed with the white-jacketed attendant in the latter's moments of leisure. The fellow was conversant with the gossip of the neighborhood, and proved willing enough to talk with a genial visitor.

Without much probing Wayne assimilated certain facts of value. The bar-man knew of the sudden death of Cullom, but had no suspicion that it was anything but purely accidental. The old man had been an occasional patron of the saloon; indeed, he had come in for a drink while waiting for a delayed car the very morning he was killed.

He seemed much pleased at the unexpected arrival of his granddaughter a few days before. Yes, the bar-man

had seen the girl—she was a blonde, and decidedly pretty. What servants did the old man keep? Only two, a housekeeper, who had been with him since his wife died—getting rather old now—and a house-man.

After the girl came back—maybe a week or so ago—she employed a butler, a foreigner of some kind—Italian, likely. He'd seen the fellow, but not very close; no, he hadn't been in; generally went to the place across the street.

Inspired by having a good listener, the man branched forth into a description of Cullom's eccentricities, and Wayne let him talk, hoping to obtain further information.

He gained little, however, except a conviction that none of the others of the gang had made an appearance in this neighborhood—unquestionably the two he had seen were Almerido and Dora.

The introduction of Zaida into the house had probably been secretly achieved; unless, indeed, the two girls so closely resembled each other as to escape ordinary detection on the street.

The time dragged slowly, but Wayne held on doggedly, eating his lunch in the saloon grill. The fact that Almerido did not appear and take a car was no longer proof that he remained in the house. He learned that Cullom had possessed an automobile, of which the houseman was chauffeur, and it was quite probable that this car would be utilized by the Mexican in any journeying he might make.

It would be less conspicuous, and quicker than the street-car, especially as, no doubt, he could operate it unaided. By three o'clock the young man's patience was exhausted, and he determined to try his luck. Noth-

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ing was to be gained by remaining longer there in concealment.

The eminent respectability of Park Grove Avenue impressed him even more by daylight than it had in the drizzle and darkness of the evening before. The houses were imposing, set well back from the street, and plainly bespoke wealth.

Motor-cars stood before several, the waiting chauffeurs were in livery, and a liveried footman came down the steps of one brown-stone front, escorting a child. He met no pedestrians, however, and strolled within view of the Cullom home, which was prominent enough to be instantly recognized.

The house had a desolate, deserted look, the curtains of the lower floor pulled down, the gate leading to the front door tightly closed. With quickening pulse he lifted the latch and advanced up the cement walk, scanning the front of the house anxiously. No semblance of life within met his eyes.

The bell was an old-fashioned one, and in response to his pull he could distinguish its sharp clang far back in the servants' quarters, as he slipped inside the vestibule, out of sight from the street. There was a long wait, and he rang again, impatiently.

A moment later a bolt rattled inside, and the door opened doubtfully, the face peering out at him that of the same individual who had first greeted him the night before. Wayne thrust his foot in the crack, and as the fellow recognized him his hostile stare changed to a look of wonderment.

"Ah! You again!" he exclaimed, surprise apparent in his tone. "You forgot something, sir?"

"I forgot to say something of importance to Miss Gray-

son last night. Would it be possible for me to speak with her a moment?"

"I think not, sir."

The fellow's tone was polite enough, deferential even, but the words sounded positive. Wayne's foot pressed the door wider, and his jaw set.

"What do you mean by that?" he questioned curtly. "That the lady will not see me? You mistake; I have been requested to call. Take my card to her."

"It is impossible, sir," the man stammered. "She is not here."

"Not here? Where is she then?"

"I do not know, sir; somewhere on the train, sir; her baggage was checked to some town in Florida."

Wayne stood staring into the man's face, scarcely comprehending the full meaning of this unexpected message. Was it a lie, an attempt to deceive, to throw him off the trail?

Did Almerido believe he would return and had he taken these means to send him astray? Or had they really gone? Somehow the fellow at the door looked honest, trustworthy; his words sounded sincere.

Perhaps he was Cullom's house-man, and not one of the gang. They might have kept him there for a blind. Wayne's mind worked rapidly to a conclusion—he desired to explore the interior, to learn its secrets; perhaps this was his opportunity.

"What is your name?"

"Charles, sir."

"You were with Mr. Cullom for some time?"

"Three years, sir; I drove his car."

"Did you drive Miss Grayson to the station when she left?"

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"Yes, sir; about eight o'clock this morning, sir—her, and the foreigner."

"Oh, so they went together? Then I cannot even have the pleasure of speaking to Señor Almerido.

"This is very provoking, Charles. Neither intimated to me last night their intention of leaving so soon. You remember my being here?"

"Oh, yes, sir; I let you in."

"So you did; and are you alone in the house? What has become of the housekeeper, Mrs. Reagan?"

The man was becoming interested, and careless, permitting the door to stand more widely ajar, as his mind turned to gossip. Already he was beginning to accept Wayne as one somewhat intimate with the family, to whom he could talk freely. His earlier suspicion had vanished.

"Oh, she, sir, ain't here no more. She up an' quit as soon as the master was buried; somehow she an' Miss Grayson didn't get on well together from the first."

"Is that so? What was the trouble?"

"I don't just know, sir, but she's a bit high-strung, Miss Grayson, an' living like she did down there in Mexico, she got maybe a little careless in her language, sir. She swore at me once like a trooper.

"I didn't mind myself, but Mrs. Reagan ain't used to that sort of thing—so she up and quit. She didn't like the Mexican snooping about the house, either."

"Quite natural, Charles. So Miss Grayson was rather rough in her ways, was she? Did you like her?"

"Well, not overly well, sir. It was a bit hard at times to think she was the old master's granddaughter; he was always quiet and good-natured, but—if you'll excuse me, sir—she was a bit rough."

"Always?"

"Well, no, sir. It seemed like she had moods—as though she was two different persons. Last night she was pleasant enough when I went up to tell her you were down-stairs."

"Perhaps there were two of them, Charles, looking sufficiently alike to appear the same—did you ever think of that possibility?"

The man laughed, struck by the absurdity of the idea.

"That's a rum notion, and it certainly was odd how that girl's temper would change; but that sort of thing couldn't be, for I was here all the time and had my eyes open. No, sir, she was just queer, that's all—like that poetess wrote about wunst—'the devil lurked under the angel in me.'"

"You've known 'em like that. That's why I'd never get married, sir, fearful I'd get that sort. It must be tough when you do."

"And they left no message for me, no letter?" Wayne asked, lingering as if reluctant.

Charles shook his head.

"Nothing sir; I was to lock the house until I heard from them again. Of course I don't mind you, being as you are a friend, and if you'd care to look about 'tain't like it would do any harm, sir."

"I will step inside a minute, Charles; possibly Almerido may have written a few words and in his hurry forgotten to hand them to you. This is very important, and I can scarcely believe he would leave without instructions of some kind."

"Very well, sir."

He held open the door, and Wayne, congratulating himself on his good fortune, stepped within the dark-

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ened hall; the entrance way instantly closed behind him. The interior had the gloomy, desolate appearance of a deserted house.

The few rays of light straggling in through the shaded transom barely rendered visible chairs already draped in linen, and an empty coat-rack. The parlor beyond, with all shades closely drawn, was black and uninviting.

Charles switched on a single electric-bulb connected with a stand-lamp, which yielded a dull, reddish glow to the great apartment.

"The *señor* wrote at the desk there before he left," he said slowly, "and it may have been for you. I must finish draping these chairs before dark."

Wayne, expecting nothing, yet glad to thus be permitted to explore without having his movements watched, advanced into the faint gleam of light, and stood gazing curiously about him. It was the same room into which he had been ushered on the previous evening, and possessed a familiar appearance, except for the linen-covered furniture.

The evidences that the house was being closed were conclusive, and no other thought occurred to him. No sound reached his ears except the movements of Charles, who was busying himself at some task in the hall.

There were two parlors, connected by a broad alcove in the old-fashioned way; the ceilings high, and rather fancifully decorated; the walls papered in a warm brown. All appeared in excellent taste, except for an overabundance of furniture, and in the rigidity of its arrangement.

The desk to which he had been referred stood against the wall of the further room, open, and a few scattered papers showing conspicuously. A door beside it, lead-

g, possibly, to the dining-room, stood partially ajar, the opening draped by a light portière, but all black beyond, as if the windows of that room also were heavily shaded.

Another door, closed, must have opened into the rear of the hall, behind the stairs. The back-parlor had, plainly enough, been used in other days as a general utility room, for besides a piano it contained a woman's work-table and a comfortable rocker or two. All these surroundings were seen at a glance, but Wayne stood motionless under the arch of the alcove, uncertain as to what he had best attempt doing, and how far he dared venture.

There was no danger of interference, he felt convinced. No one other than this simple-minded, unsuspecting caretaker was in the house; and all that Charles knew of him was that he was a personal friend of both Zaida Grayson and Señor Almerido. Given a fairly reasonable excuse the man would offer no objection to any prowling about he might care to attempt.

Indeed, he had already practically offered him free passage, busying himself with other duties, and leaving the intruder entirely alone. Charles evidently had no possible connection with the gang, but had merely been retained because of his former employment.

Besides, it was clear enough from his conversation that he had no liking for either the girl or the Mexican, merely serving them as a matter of form, not wishing to lose his job. The opportunity into which Wayne had thus blindly stumbled was too important to be lost; there were possibilities in these rooms now opened to inspection; some accident might reveal the very clew he sought—a

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written line carelessly dropped into a waste-basket, any little thing might point the way to solving of this whole mystery.

He would be a fool to hesitate now; a cowardly fool to fail in probing the affair to the bottom.

Zaida's very life, perhaps, hung on the thoroughness with which he searched the house. She had been here with him last night—in this very room—seeking in vain an opportunity to whisper some secret into his ear. The desire was expressed in her eyes, her manner.

But where had these demons hidden her since then? She certainly was not the one who had gone South with Almerido; that was not at all likely. If any one had gone it was the girl who was playing her part—anxious to keep well out of sight until the time arrived when these scheming villains must play their last hand.

That purpose was quite understandable, and meanwhile Zaida—the real Zaida—closely guarded, would be held as hostage, possibly even compelled to perform certain necessary acts to forward their purposes. To desert her now would be foulest treachery—he would search every room in the house; she had been in one of them alone only last evening.

Perhaps she had left behind some guiding message, some suggestion. At least he would try.

He went forward to the opened desk, alert but unsuspecting. The man had not followed him into the room, but was bustling about elsewhere out of sight; he could hear his footsteps on the uncarpeted floor of the hall. The sheets of paper littering the opened desk were mostly blank, but one sheet contained a few sentences in writing.

The light was so dim, and the penmanship so undecipherable, that Wayne was obliged to stoop over to make

out the words. While he was in that position a gruff voice spoke at his back.

"Wheel around, Mr. Story-Teller; darn glad to see you again. Now, Steve, frisk the blame fool, and get his gat."

It was the familiar voice of Dave Cowan.

CHAPTER XV

THE FIGHT FOR LIFE

Wayne straightened up, as startled as if a piece of lead had been dropped down his back, the sudden silence rendering him dumb. He was conscious of Groggin's deft fingers removing the automatic from his pocket, his own muscles appeared useless and dead.

He stared, dull-eyed, into the faces about him, recognizing them, and realizing how they had accomplished this surprise. Cowan was at his right, a revolver levelled, his evil eyes glaring down the barrel. He had evidently stepped out from behind the draperies.

Groggin had not even entirely emerged, being able to reach across the edge of the desk to perform his work. Beyond these two, his head cautiously advanced through the opened door leading into the hall, appeared the countenance of Charles.

As Wayne recognized him, a swift comprehension of the fellow's treachery flashing into his mind, the man was thrust unceremoniously aside, and Señor Almerido, thin lips grinning, strode into the room. He ruled his hands, plainly delighted at the spectacle of Wayne's utter helplessness, and danced gayly forward to reach his prisoner.

"Ah, Señor Wayne, vat a pleasure to so greet you again. You would have ze speech viz Señorita Gray—yes? Eet grieve me she be not here; zat she jouz south. Perhaps you tell me vat you tell her."

Wayne never moved, never opened his lips, but his brain was clearing from shock, and the hot blood was rushing back into his veins. The Mexican misunderstood the silence.

"I told zem you cum back; zat you vas zat kind. Bah! I know ze Americans like you—a voman always does ze business. Vy ve hunt ven you come to us yourself—hey?"

"Some cute little amateur detective, ain't yer?" broke in Cowan derisively. "All you'd ever detect won't hurt no one—not fer a while, anyhow."

He laughed gruffly in grim humor.

"Say, I read a book o' yours once—a corkin' good detective story it was, too—an' yer guessed that out all right; but ye're a long ways from makin' good on this one. Charlie here wus too darn smart fer yer."

Wayne heard, but paid no heed; one thought had taken possession of his mind and dominated it to the exclusion of all else. It was the conception that these fellows would never dare fire; that their threatening to shoot was a mere bluff which they would never venture to execute.

They were in hiding here, and the neighborhood was so respectable that the sound of a shot would instantly create an alarm. It was a still day, with passers-by on the street just in front of the door, an automobile before the next house, and children playing just around the corner.

This knowledge gripped him with hope, with determination. The fellows would never dare pull trigger—a shot ringing out in that neighborhood would mean disclosure, capture—the puncturing of the whole bubble. They would not take the risk.

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He hardened into cool, deliberate purpose, his lips and eyes smiling as he formed a plan of action.

"It rather looks as if you were right, Cowan," he said cheerfully. "I am a bum detective; but at least I know when I have played out my cards. Put down the gun—there is no chance of my getting away, with four of you against me. That's better; it makes me nervous to look into that thing."

He sat back easily upon the open desk, genially pleasant and curious. To all appearances there was no fight in him, only a desire to make matters as pleasant as possible.

"Now that you fellows got me dead to rights, what's the program?"

"Vat you mean—ze program?" And Almerido thrust his sharp-visaged face over Cowan's shoulder.

"Why, what do you plan to do with me? I suppose you've figured it all out, for this was a put-up job. Of course the girl never went south; that was all a lie to draw me on—"

"*Si, Señor*, she go south; but I no go with her—I stay for zis."

"I'll accept that for what it is worth, my friend, and then discount it liberally. But let that go; what I am particularly interested in at present is my own situation.

"I am in your hands, weaponless"—he extended his arms—"and helpless to escape. I am no fool, and know I am in a bad pickle, and having danced must pay the fiddler. What I am anxious to learn now is the price."

"Vat you zink vud eet be?"

Wayne's eyes ranged across the faces watching him. Cowan appeared amused, the others were sullen and ma-

licious; the teeth of the Mexican gleamed like those of a hungry tiger, and his words snapped out.

The prospect was far from reassuring, but the observer continued to smile genially.

"Not a very merciful-looking bunch," he admitted carelessly, "and no doubt you feel as kindly toward me as a pack of dogs would toward a treed cat; but I take it that you retain some sense among you. I don't for a moment question what you would prefer doing—but do you dare do it?"

"I do not place murder beyond your accomplishments, but I do want to impress on you all that in this case it is not entirely safe.

"In the first place, I am rather widely and favorably known. In a few hours at most I would be missed and sought for. In the second place, this house would at once be suspicioned and searched."

Cowan laughed.

"Didn't you suppose we knowed that?" he growled. "An' what wud they find here? Not even a caretaker. This is no hang-out of ours, an' yer friends cud search it to the roof an' back fer all we cared. Don't pull any con on me, cull, fer I'm too old a bird fer that sorter chaff.

"What we do with yer's our own business. Come on, Groggin, we've listened long enough to this rooster crow; he'll lose his spurs soon."

Wayne realized how little he had accomplished, yet that little was all he had hoped for. He had so completely disarmed the suspicions of the men before him as to render them careless; they no longer felt him to be dangerous, but believed he had accepted his fate; that he

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was a spiritless creature, already begging for mercy.

Cowan had lowered his weapon, and Almerido turned away to give some order to Charles, who remained uncertain in the open doorway leading to the hall. The dim light from the single electric bulb merely outlined the faces, leaving them expressionless.

The young man's hand, concealed beneath a fold of his coat, closed tightly on a heavy paper-weight lying on the desk. It was his only weapon, but he had determined on its use, and was aware that the moment had arrived.

Groggin, with an oath, gripped his left arm, but, jerking from the fellow's grasp, he let fly the missile.

There was a crash of glass, darkness, a roar of rage from Cowan, while Steve, struck by a flying shoulder, went catapulting into a corner as Wayne sprang backward through the draping curtains into the blackness of the room beyond. The action was so swift that if Cowan whipped up his gun he had no conception of where to fire; he could only dash blindly forward, clutching at the darkness.

Wayne struck a table and a chair, overturning the latter with a crash, yet attained the opposite wall before his pursuers had recovered sufficiently to thrust aside the curtains in an effort to overtake him.

He had no knowledge of where to turn in his flight, and knew nothing of the house. He had simply obeyed a mad impulse, a determination to stake life on the possibility of escape. Cowan's voice, like the bellow of a bull, sounded as the fugitive's hand touched the knob of the door:

"The hall, some of yer! Head him off—Groggin; Hartley—strike a light!"

There was a glimmer of a match behind him, but Wayne crashed the door shut, stumbled against the foot of a staircase, and ran silently up the steps, disappearing into the darkness above before the baffled pursuers broke through into the lower hall.

His one purpose now was escape; he cared not how. He heard the howl of the wolves behind, especially the falsetto of Almerido, who had sufficiently recovered to yelp out orders in broken English:

"He go oop ze back stair! You—Cowan, Groggin; see eet vas zar. Vy you not grab heem. *Dios de Dios*, ze fellar have no gun. Queek now—I vill go by ze front vay—so he be caught. Keel him with ze hit on ze head!"

There was daylight above; not much, but a little stealing in through shades not carefully lowered, and rendering visible the interior of various rooms opening off the hall. Wayne had no chance to choose; he must trust to luck; with both stairways guarded, his only remaining hope would be some unfastened window.

He dashed headlong through the first open door, but found neither key nor bolt with which to bar the passage behind him. It was too late to seek refuge elsewhere; Cowan was already half-way up the stairs, cursing and threatening. Wayne, slamming the door in his face, piled against it every article of furniture he could reach, and then desperately sought the windows.

These could be used, yet his heart sank as he looked down; not only was it a sheer drop to a hard cement walk circling the house, but, crouched in the shadow of a concealing bush, he saw Hartley. The ex-chauffeur grinned cheerfully, and a ray of light glittered ominously on a revolver in his right hand.

Wayne could have essayed the drop, daring the chance

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of a broken limb, but to have done so would have left him even more helpless than he had been before.

There was only one way left—to fight.

Cowan's shoulder struck the door, his giant strength forcing the barricade of furniture aside as he heaved and pressed a passage. Wayne had barely time to wheel about, to grip the first weapon at hand, an overturned stool, when the infuriated brute, bellowing with rage, burst into the room, a revolver waved threateningly. Mad and desperate as he was, the fellow paused at sight of Wayne's attitude.

"Now, see yere!" he roared. "What's the use o' yer puttin' up a fight? We got yer an' if yer don't drop that stool I'll blow a hole clear through yer carcass. I don't want no better fun."

"You are a cheap liar, Cowan," and the voice answering was as cold as ice. "I am going to call your bluff, you big stiff. I dare you to shoot me; you were afraid to do so down-stairs, with every window closed tight—here they are open, and the report of a gun would alarm everybody in the neighborhood. That is the last thing you lads want."

"What do I care?" gruffly, yet uncertain. "You'd never tell about it after I shot, an' there's plenty round yere to clear me."

Wayne smiled grimly, determined to play his hand boldly.

"Because that sort of publicity is the very thing you fellows better avoid just at present. Now, listen to me, you big fool—I know your game; I'm on to it, from the time Almerido brought Zaida Grayson out of Mexico, down to the sudden death of Patrick Cullom."

"Is that so?" mockingly. "Well, what good will all that knowledge do yer—dead?"

"Hey, Almerido! Come here, you an' Groggin. I've got the guy cornered, an' now he's stallin'. What's that yer said 'bout the death of Cullom?"

"That I knew what caused it."

"Sure; the old feller fell down-stairs. The coroner turned in that verdict; yer don't claim he was croaked, do yer?"

Wayne looked at him, and into the faces of the Mexican and Steve behind in the doorway. Perhaps he had gone far enough, yet it might be well for him to drive his point home, make it absolutely clear that he was not alone engaged in this investigation, and that his death would be avenged.

"He was deliberately murdered," he answered calmly, watching the effect of his words. "And that crime was part of the plan to gain control of his property through the inheritance of the granddaughter."

"Ze pig!" hissed Almerido furiously. "*Dios de Dios*, I slit ze dam throat! How you zay ziss ven ze coroner swear ze man fall, an' so was keeled? Who believe you?"

"The coroner failed to notice a slight wound, concealed by his hair, behind the man's ear. Also, he had no knowledge of a peculiar South American poison called curare.

"Now do you believe that I know how Cullom died?"

The three looked at one another in silence, the fallow face of the Mexican ghastly from fright. For the instant he was speechless; then his lips gave utterance to a string of Spanish oaths.

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There was murder in the glare of his eyes as he crouched behind Cowan, and Wayne, realizing that his words had struck directly home, stepped backward against the wall, the stool uplifted for defense.

"Hold on there!" he said sternly. "If you attempt to knife me, Almerido, you'll never get out of this town alive; not one of you. I am not working alone!"

"You zay zat! Bah! 'Tis a lie!"

"No, it is no lie—listen! Was I the only man you left behind you in the Hartigan house? Well, you have more occasion to fear that other man than me. He is an officer of the law, the one who studied out the real cause of Patrick Cullom's mysterious death—"

"What's his name?"

"You'll not learn that from me, Cowan. If Nell Brennon had seen him she would know. But if I do not return, this man will hunt for me—*here!*"

"Do you get that? He'll hunt for me *here*; and he will know whom I have been up against."

"Oh, darn your threats! We'll shut your mouth first, and then take care of your bloomin' friend. Come on, Don, Groggin; we're three to one—let's finish him!"

It was some fight, but with Steve Groggin out of it at the first blow. He sprang at Wayne from the left, thinking to dash through his guard, and grapple the throat as in a barroom scuffle, but the latter was sufficiently alert to block the trick, the heavy stool descending with a force that drove the fellow stumbling to the floor, but left only one splintered leg of wood in Wayne's grasp.

The sudden action, however, saved him from contact with the swinging butt of Cowan's revolver, which, instead of smashing in his skull, struck his shoulder a

glancing blow, the brute losing his balance, and only keeping from falling by gaining the support of the wall.

Wayne jammed the broken stool-leg full into his chest, and sprang straight at the crouching Almerido, who, with murderous eyes and gleaming knife, barred the way to the open door.

Here was his dangerous antagonist, the one with the silent weapon he dare use, and the will to use it.

But the Mexican was a snake, his tactics those of a coward. Before Wayne's onrush he slipped swiftly back, avoiding the other's grip, protecting himself with the slashing blade, into the darker hallway.

Into Wayne's mind flashed the meaning of this strategy—a chance for the giant Cowan to recover and take him from the rear—and, disregarding the threat of the knife, he leaped straight at the skulker.

The sharp steel cut into arm and chest, but his fingers had the Mexican's throat, as he crushed the fellow against the upper stair-rail. But now Almerido fought like the devil he was; fought as the mongrel fights, using every dirty trick of the assassin—nails, teeth, gouging fingers—in an attempt to break free.

And he possessed strength; his muscles were like steel springs, his methods those of a maddened cat. Wayne sought in vain to force him back over the rail; his legs clung desperately to the posts, althought the knife fell clattering onto the steps below.

The fight raged for a minute, two minutes, the struggle savage as between wild animals; and then Cowan, bel-lowing like a bull, crashed into them, so infuriated as to be absolutely blind.

His huge bulk crushed them against the rail, which snapped and gave way, the two men toppling forward

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and plunging headlong down the stairs. Cowan caught himself on the edge, but the others, still gripped together, went over helplessly, landed in a jumbled heap at bottom, and lay there motionless.

CHAPTER XVI

BACK FROM THE DEAD

Consciousness came back to Wayne slowly; nothing really defined itself in his mind, even his memory failed. He felt too weak to move, and for some time possessed not the slightest knowledge as to where he was. Everything was strange and dark.

At first he believed himself blind, but suddenly a red glare of light flashed in, illuminating the roof above where he lay, and passing as swiftly by. But this glimpse, together with the motion of the floor, aroused him to a dim realization of his position—he was in an empty box car which was moving rapidly.

The jar, the roar of the wheels, became clear and distinct. He extended his hand, but touched nothing except the wood floor. He felt weak, giddy, his head throbbed with pain, yet he had braced himself in an effort to sit up when he thought he heard a voice, and again lay absolutely still, listening.

He remembered now what had happened—the trap laid for him in the Cullom house; the desperate attempt to escape; the fight in the upper hall, and his final plunge with Almerido down those back stairs. These memories did not return all at once, but came little by little as his benumbed brain began to act; yet they served to arouse caution, to hold him quiet.

There was some one talking, a man with a deep, coarse

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voice, but the car made such a noise that he could scarcely distinguish a word. He heard no one else speak, yet there must be two, or there would be no conversation.

The voice was as harsh as Cowan's, but different; he had never heard it before. Neither man moved, and the darkness shrouded everything.

Who were they? What were they doing there? Did their presence have any connection with his situation? Could they be members of the gang placed on guard over him?

These questions came dully into Wayne's mind, but were unanswerable. They merely served to increase his suspicion, and to hold him motionless. He became aware that he rested in one corner; that his coat had been removed, and now, wadded up as a pillow, supported his head.

The speed of the train slackened a little, the rumble of the wheels became less pronounced, and the voice of the speaker more distinct.

"What place do yer s'pose this is, Dick?"

"Ain't nothin' yere, but we must be pretty clost ter Mendota," returned the other sleepily. "I uster brake on this road."

"Mendota—what's there?"

"Nuthin' much, 'cept a lunch-counter an' railroad crossin'. Why, Bill?"

"'Cause I'm goin' to get out while the gettin's good—that's why. That guy's a darned sight worse hurt than Ike told us, Dick, an' I don't aim to be caught in this car 'long with a stiff."

"Yer think he's goin' to croak?"

"I ain't so sure he ain't croaked now. When I felt o' him he felt cold—his skin did, an' I couldn't tell fer

sure he even breathed. I'm ready ter do a pal a good turn, specially when I'm paid 'nough fer it, but I don't git hang'd for nobody's else's job—not me.

"We'll skip at Mendota, or whatever this next jay town is, and let this guy go on alone—he ain't likely to bother nobody."

"Whar'll we go, back to Chi?"

The coarser-voiced man swore.

"Not fer a while. I dunno what this yere is all about, an' there ain't any use gittin' mixed up 'long with Ike Hartigan as I knows of. We got money, an' it's my notion we drift 'long to St. Louie till we git things straight.

"Then, maybe, we kin blow back ter Hooligan's place, an' hold up Ike fer sum more chink. He's got sum rich game one ter spend the way he is, believe me."

"Is that his hang-out—Hooligan's?"

"Mostly; Tim's one o' the ol' bunch, an' Ike don't know many in town eny more. He's got a dame ter hide somewhere; an' Hooligan can put a skirt out o' sight as slick as anybody. Come on, Dick, beat it—the train's most stopped."

"And leave the guy lyin' yere?"

"Why not?" brutally. "If he ain't a stiff, he will be afore the car's ever opened. That's whut Ike paid us fer, an' I don't want ter be caught in yere with the mutt. Come on; we've got ter crawl out the end door."

Wayne's limbs were painfully cramped from the position in which he lay, but he dared not move a muscle as the two men passed him. The train came to a jerky stop, a voice could be heard calling outside; the car was not up to the station, yet an electric light not far away threw sufficient light through the end window to make

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plainly visible the movements of the two men.

Their faces were indistinct, unrecognizable, except that one, the heavier individual, wore a beard. He was the first to clamber out through the narrow opening and lower himself to the coupling, where he clung silently until the other joined him.

Neither spoke, nor, apparently, glanced toward the figure of their victim, huddled in the black corner. A little later Wayne, intently listening for the slightest sound, heard the two leap to the ground, and then the shuffle of their feet on the gravel as they hurried away.

He was alone, deserted, left there to die.

Yet no conception of such a miserable ending was in his mind. The hour during which he had been lying there, semiconscious, had thoroughly convinced him that his injuries were not serious.

Exactly what they consisted of he was unable to determine, but already he felt a renewal of life, and a return of strength to both brain and body. He was again thinking clearly, planning for future action, and now, that he was safely alone, began immediately to exercise his muscles in an effort to ascertain the real nature of his injuries.

Apparently his head had suffered most severely, either from his plunge down the stairs, or the blow struck later by the desperate Cowan. The result had been a complete numbing of all his faculties, a comatose condition closely resembling death, and total unconsciousness, probably for hours.

This absolute deadening of the functions of the brain had doubtless affected the circulation of the blood, and hence led to an almost complete cessation of the pulse, causing Bill to believe him a dead man. Even now his

limbs seemingly were paralyzed, although the numbness was passing away with the effort to move them, and the strained muscles were beginning to ache and throb.

With set teeth, he struggled desperately to sit up, but the jerk of the train as it once more began progress occurred before he succeeded in accomplishing this result, and they were well out of the yards, rattling across the final switches onto the main line, by the time he attained his feet, clinging to the sill of the window in the endeavor to remain erect.

Standing there, jerked about by the erratic movements of the car, he became aware of his deplorable condition; he retained scarcely enough strength to remain erect; his temples were throbbing with agony, and his hair matted with clotted blood. He felt inexpressibly dirty, and his clothing was in a sadly torn and soiled condition.

Apparently he possessed no hat, at least he could locate none in the darkness. He was weak from hunger, and his lips were parched by thirst. He explored his pockets, only to discover them empty—nothing remained valuable even for identification, excepting a small lodge-pin in the lapel of his coat.

Yet he smiled grimly in the darkness as his mind grasped the full significance of being actually alive, able yet to thwart those villains in the execution of their murderous plans.

He was able now to grasp the situation, and to perceive the way with new clearness. In the very depth of his present misery and defeat he had stumbled onto a clue which might yet bring success—*Hooligan's place*.

Beyond doubt, if, as he judged, this was a well-known resort of thieves, the spot could be identified easily—Stiles might know where it was, or, if he did not, then

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Dermott or Corcoran would. It could be found, for, in all likelihood, it was not far from the Burlington tracks.

That was why the freight-car had suggested itself to Cowan as the safest method of getting his body out of the city. The ex-pugilist no doubt believed him hurt unto death, and grasped this as the safest means of escaping detection. With some inkling of who Wayne was, his comparative prominence in the city, he knew that his strange disappearance would not pass unnoticed, but an unidentified body, presumably that of a tramp, in a box car, would arouse little interest.

If discovered a long distance away, the probability of the crime being traced back to Chicago would be quite remote. The death would naturally be charged to a fight between hoboos, the body consigned to the potters' field in some far-off town, and the whole affair promptly forgotten.

By sending a crony or two along with the dying man, thus making doubly sure of avoiding danger, the ruffian felt convinced that the young man would never again cross his path.

Beyond doubt this was the explanation of his present situation. From the moment when he had crashed down the back stairs, with Almerido still in his grip, Wayne retained not the slightest memory. All that had occurred until the time of his recovering consciousness in the car remained a complete blank.

Yet he knew the probable story of those intervening hours. Whether or not the Mexican had been seriously injured he could not tell. But he, unquestionably, had been picked up to all appearances dangerously hurt. Cowan must have thought him dying, and become ob-

essed with the one desire to get him safely out of the way.

To that end he had been carried out the back way, secretly loaded into the Cullom automobile, and driven to this Hooligan resort under cover of night. The proprietor, perhaps unwilling to have the death occur in his establishment, suggested the railroad journey.

Probably this was not the first occasion such a method had been resorted to, and Cowan was glad enough of the suggestion. Wayne remained unconscious, the blow on his head leaving him almost pulseless, and thus, amid the concealing shadows of the night, he had been thrust into a convenient car and sent forth on a journey to death.

Well, he was not dead—far from it; but it might serve him well to have Cowan believe that he had met his end. No doubt Bill would so report, and as a result the gang would no longer be on guard.

As for his own determination, it had only hardened in purpose, grown more grim and bitter. The fight had become personal.

He could distinguish the swerving of the car as the long train took a side-track and slowed down. There was no flicker of lights indicating a town, but there was a rasping of brakes; a man ran along the roof over his head, and finally with a jerk the train came to a stop.

A voice at some distance shouted something indistinguishable, and then all noise ceased. With considerable effort Wayne succeeded in reaching the sill of the window, where he could look out between the cars.

It was still night, yet there was a slight glow of dawn in the east, barely sufficient to make dimly visible nearby

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objects. To the left arose the steep incline of a cut, shutting off all further view, but to the right lay the two parallel main tracks, and, clearly outlined against the sky, appeared the ugly framework of a shed. Overhead the stars twinkled, and no sound disturbed the silence.

Evidently the freight had been run in on a side track, yet it could not be far distant from a town. Anxious to escape unseen, Wayne lowered himself to the ground on the side of the bank.

Crouched in the shadow, and convinced that no trainmen were in sight, he ventured to clamber up the side of the sharp cut.

From the summit he obtained a fair view ahead, marking the curving length of the dark train, and not far distant the glimmer of numerous lamps indicating the presence of a town. Evidently the side track was part of the yard system, for an incandescent light blazed over a wagon-road scarcely a hundred yards away.

Feeling this to be a safer mode of travel, Wayne climbed the railroad fence, and stumbled across a narrow field, until he came out upon the highway. It was well traveled, and he soon came within the radius of the lights, finally debouching upon a cement sidewalk.

As he advanced, meeting no one, the houses all dark, he felt vigor return to his limbs, and a clearer conception of his best course flashed through his mind.

Evidently he was approaching a town of considerable size, a manufacturing city of some importance. Off at his right he read a sign, illuminated by electric lights, announcing a new hotel, one hundred rooms with baths, and this announcement caused him to feel in his empty pockets.

He was hatless, collarless, his clothes in rags, un-

washed, a most disreputable object. He stopped to consider what he should do. With no money, no acquaintance in the town, the prospect was far from cheering. Who would believe his story to the extent of advancing cash?

He might beat his way back on a freight—it probably was not a great distance—but in the meanwhile he must eat, and at least procure some head-covering. His eyes noted the lodge-emblem in the button-hole of his coat. If there chanced to be a member of the order in the place, he could doubtless convince him of his identity, and obtain assistance. Encouraged by this thought, he plowed on through the gray mist.

A turn brought him to the outskirts of the business district, and on the second corner he encountered a policeman, leaning against a mail-box and idly swinging his night-stick. Evidently the man had heard his approaching steps in the silence, and was waiting to see who was abroad at so early an hour.

At the sight of Wayne he stiffened, and when he spoke the sound of his voice was decidedly hostile.

"Well, bo," he said crisply, "you've struck the wrong burg; you better beat it, before I run you in."

"I would rather enjoy being run in at present," answered Wayne.

"Lookin' for lodgin', hey—come now, what's the game?"

Wayne laughed.

"I suppose I do look rather tough, officer," he said. "But that is my misfortune, not my fault. I live in Chicago; my name is Wayne—Stuart Wayne. I presume you never heard of me?"

The policeman's grin broadened; here was a new one.

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"I sure never did; when did you blow in?"

"I was slugged some time early last evening, an^d thrown into a freight car," went on Wayne earnestly. "Probably they thought I was killed; look at my head."

"An awful whack, sure," becoming interested. "Was that done in Chi?"

"Yes; I never came to until out yonder on the siding; that's the train pulling in now. What town is this?"

"Kewanee," still suspicious. "Know anybody here?"

"Not a soul."

"That your own coat you're wearing? 'Cause, if it is, I don't see any need of you goin' hungry; that's a Caribou pin, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, the chief's in that lodge—I ain't; but he'll come down by eight o'clock, an' if you make good the old man 'll treat you square; you better come along with me to the station. I ain't so darned sure you're not lying; but you ain't drunk, and can doze a bit till Kelly gets down."

CHAPTER XVII

WAYNE CONCEIVES AN IDEA

Kelly came down-town ahead of time, a big good-natured fellow, with a pair of shrewd, gray eyes, and a jaw betokening belligerency. His interview with Wayne was brief but satisfactory, resulting in a substantial breakfast, an improvement in apparel, and the price of a ticket to Chicago.

The two parted on the station-platform very good friends indeed, and the chief, scenting the battle from afar, would have accompanied his guest to the city, had it been possible. As it was, Wayne departed loaded down with good advice, which he promptly forgot as he curled up in a seat and fell asleep.

By three o'clock, somewhat refreshed, and with plan of action already outlined, he reached his apartments. A bunch of letters lay on his desk, and he paused long enough to run them hastily through his hands. One, from Stiles, he tore open and read. It was brief, evidently a quickly scrawled note, bearing date the evening before :

Called to Washington; absent week or ten days. Mighty sorry to leave just now, for the Cullom case is getting interesting. Have discovered to-day his granddaughter was with him when the fire broke out. This never appeared before the coroner's jury, and she failed to testify. The old man did his banking at the Merchants' Exchange. You are

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a friend of Bob Carlton's; dig some information out of him. Don't worry about the girl; no matter how desperate they are, they will not dare do her any serious injury until the estate is settled—they might need her alive. See Carlton, and then leave the rest until I return.

Wayne sank down into a chair, the note still in his hand, and read it over again. He was in no mood for patience, nor had he faith in the mercy of those fellows. Even if, for purposes of their own, they spared Zaida Grayson's life, her condition remained a miserable one—held prisoner in some low resort, perhaps submitted to unspeakable indignities, suffering untold mental agony, with death probably her ultimate fate, unless rescue came at the right moment.

His hand, sweeping aside some papers on the desk, revealed the hasty sketch of the girl's face that he had made from memory, and he bent over it eagerly. This was not the mere solving of a mystery of crime in which his interest had been aroused—it was to serve this woman.

No professional instinct rendered him indifferent to the deep personal interest involved. While he would enjoy bringing these villains to book, giving them full punishment for their crime, foiling them in every way, yet the hope which spurred him on was that of rescuing the girl.

Nothing else counted in his mind. She had become more and more a part of his life; he began now, gazing at that rude sketch, to realize dimly how deeply interested he truly was. The face appealed to him; the memory of her gripped his imagination.

Wait ten days, two weeks, for Stiles to return? Leave her in the hands of those ruffians all that time? The

thing was unthinkable; he would be an unspeakable cur to desert her to such a fate.

He would seek Bob Carlton—that advice was good; if Bob had been Cullom's banker he ought to know the truth. He was one to be trusted, one to keep his own counsel and remain quiet until the right time came.

Moreover, Bob would respond to the other side of the case—the personal side. The unhappy situation of the girl would appeal to him.

Realizing that any action was impossible before morning, Wayne sat there smoking for a long while, turning over and over in his mind each separate detail of this strange case, in the solving of which he had become so unexpectedly involved. Unquestionably he was upon the track of penetrating its mystery, yet even now it was largely surmise.

Convinced himself as to the guilt of those who were holding the girl captive, the proof of that guilt was still lacking.

Who was directly responsible for the death of Patrick Cullom? And was some one impersonating Zaida Grayson in an endeavor to gain possession of the estate? These two most important questions remained unanswered.

To-morrow he would take steps leading toward the answer; he would first learn the truth about Hooligan's place, and later, after banking-hours, hold private consultation with Carlton. Then he would know better what course to pursue; but to-night he needed a bath and rest.

The final decision relative to the proper Hooligan was more complicated than he had anticipated. The city directory gave seven of that name as engaged in the saloon

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business, three within the radius immediately surrounding the Burlington tracks.

Unable to decide which was the more likely to be the one sought, he invaded the City Hall and interviewed Corcoran, without giving the latter any specific information as to his object. A drink, however, loosened the detective's tongue.

"Well, let's see; there's more Hooligans in this town than sparrows. West Forty-Second—oh, yes, that's Jim Hooligan's place; he's all right, just a quiet old Irishman, runs a family joint; nobody ever had any trouble with him—he wouldn't harm a fly.

"Western Avenue, you say? Wait till I think; that must be Mike Hooligan's saloon. I arrested Mike once for manslaughter, but he got off. He's a darn good fellow, only hot-headed. Some rowdies hang out there, but nothin' worse—no police-record.

"What is the other one? Oh, yes, Bat Hooligan, over on Canal; he's likely the gink you're after. Bat's an old-timer, and sports a pretty tough gang.

"By the way, if this case has reference to that Ike Hartigan you and Dan Stiles were asking about, it just occurred to me that Bat and old man Hartigan used to sport round together. That's when I first got on the force, back in eighty-one or eighty-two."

"Runs a tough joint, does he?"

"In trouble most of the time; regular thieves' den, but hard to get the goods on him. Saloon's in the basement, but he's got a lease on the whole building, and there's a way of getting out we ain't on to yet.

"He's a smooth guy, Bat, with a big pull up here. He makes more straw-bailing than he does running a saloon; every dip in town knows him."

"A dangerous place to go to?"

Corcoran rested his hand on Wayne's shoulder, lowering his voice.

"Young fellow, don't you ever try it alone; leastwise not without a gat in your mitt, unless you're going there peaceful. I ain't exactly wise to your game, but you're a friend of Stiles's, and so I'm giving you a bit of advice.

"And that is—let Bat Hooligan be, unless you take a squad of harness bulls along with you. He ain't overly fond of strangers what drop in. Was it, may I ask, your idea that maybe Ike was a hanging out in Bat's joint?"

"I have some reason to believe so."

"It wouldn't be impossible; but don't you go moseying round there alone; 'tain't noways healthy. I know a half-dozen young fellers who hang round there. If I'd pinch one of them he'd squeal; them guys are all yellow. Better try that out first."

"All right, Corcoran," Wayne agreed, impressed by the man's earnestness. "But before I do I want to look around a bit myself—make sure I am on the right track, you know."

He started toward the door, but paused at sight of a morning paper lying open on a settee, suddenly impressed with a new thought.

"Have you been reading the news this morning?"

"Sure; nice diamond pull-off in Cleveland; looks like Billy Burke was at it again."

"You know him?"

"No, if this was his job, it's his first west of New York. We've got his mug here, and orders to look out for him. He and Bob Howland are in cahoots, but Bob has gone to South America—it got too hot for him in Chicago.

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The only time I was ever in Bat Hooligan's place I was looking for Bob."

"He hung out there?"

"I ain't sure; Bat is too darn slick to get caught with the goods, but the chief thinks he's the fence for some of them big boys. Anyhow, I didn't spot anything wrong; then the next we knew Bob was out of the country."

"But Hooligan knew him? Had dealings with him?"

"Sure; there's no doubt of that."

"And this other fellow, Burke, are they acquainted also?"

"They might be, but so far as I know Burke was never in Chicago, and I don't believe Bat has been out of his joint three hours at a time in ten years. Course they're likely hep to each other."

"What's this Billy Burke look like?"

"Oh, about your size and weight; light hair and gray eyes, anywhere from twenty-five to thirty years old. Some dresser, they tell me. Come over to the office and I'll show you his picture."

In a side room of the office Corcoran swung the leaves of a photograph-cabinet until his blunt forefinger rested on the photograph of a young man bending over a desk.

"That's him," he said, rather glumly. "Just a snapshot; the New York police never held him long enough to mug him proper."

"And he's never been in Chicago?"

"Well, course I can't say as to that, Mr. Wayne; but he ain't never done no work here. What are you aiming at?" suspiciously. "Pretending to be Billy Burke, and so get a stand-in with Bat Hooligan?"

"Do you suppose it could be done?"

Coreoran shook his head, lighting a fresh cigar.

"It would be a deuce of a risky job," he said slowly and doubtfully. "For even if old Bat never seen Billy, he ain't no darn fool, and would put you through one awful examination.

"Maybe you could work the racket; you are educated and smart; and if you've got the nerve maybe you could fool Hooligan, but I wouldn't want to give you no life insurance while you was trying it.

"You better let me go pump some of those young guys what hang round there—they'll cough up, all right."

Wayne left him, however, unconvinced, and rather fascinated by this new idea. He had been struck by a peculiar resemblance to himself in Burke's picture—a pose of the head, a similarity of feature outline—so noticeable as to be almost startling.

To be sure, this resemblance would doubtless disappear altogether if he and the other ever came face to face, but to a stranger it might be convincing. Yet he was confronted by two important questions—had Hooligan ever met Billy, and, if not, was it possible that he had seen Wayne during his period of unconsciousness?

Neither question could be answered otherwise than through experiment. To take a chance was the only solution, and that chance was so desperate as to yield him small encouragement.

In addition to the danger from Hooligan himself, he would face the possibility of encountering Cowan or some of his gang. To be sure, they might now believe him dead, but that would never prevent recognition.

The scheme was altogether too reckless, and was dismissed before he had walked a block; only as a last resort would he consider it seriously.

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The visit to the bank added but little to his stock of information. Carlton was not in, had gone on a fishing-trip to Wisconsin, and might not return for ten days. Watson, the senior partner, knew Wayne only slightly, and, while he endeavored to be polite, was not inclined to talk freely about a matter of business in the hands of the house.

Wayne, on his part, was handicapped by a desire not to explain too clearly the cause of his interest in the matter. It would never do, at this stage at least, to arouse Watson's suspicions.

Carlton could have been trusted to act with discretion; but Watson would only ring up the police headquarters and mess up the whole affair.

However, by extremely careful inquiries, Wayne managed to extract a few important facts from the cautious financier. He learned that the bank was acting in the matter of Patrick Cullom's estate; the will was already in probate, and practically the entire property had been left to a granddaughter, Zaida Grayson.

There had been no contest, and the bank was authorized to honor the girl's checks to a reasonable amount. No, she was not at present in the city; she had been long enough to execute certain papers, but had departed for the South—Florida.

Her personal representative in Chicago was a friend of her father's, who had come from Mexico with her, a Señor Juan Almerido, a lawyer. Yes, he had been given power of attorney. Miss Grayson was not in good health, and required a milder climate.

It might be several weeks yet before a final settlement was made. Señor Almerido—he received his mail at the Central Hotel, but generally called at the bank once a

day—was a very pleasant gentleman to deal with; but foreign, and somewhat unacquainted with American business methods. Rather impatient to have the affair settled, so he might return to Mexico.

This comprised the gist of what Wayne, questioning judiciously, succeeded in extracting from Watson. However, he did this without awakening the banker's suspicions that his curiosity was unusual, and they parted on friendly terms.

Nothing had been said that was likely to lead Watson to mention the visit to Almerido, and Wayne dare not venture further than he did. He desired to see the handwriting of this mysterious Miss Grayson, who had so swiftly disappeared southward, evidently to avoid observation, but could think of no reasonable excuse for such a request. His limited acquaintance with Watson would scarcely justify such a suggestion.

He dropped in at a near-by hotel and sat down in the lobby to think the matter over, and endeavor to plan out some practical course of action. The plan of the conspiracy was becoming more and more clear, and seemingly was working perfectly. Thus far no suspicion had been aroused, and the gang had nothing further to do, except keep out of sight and calmly await results.

No thought that Cullom had been deliberately murdered had even been suggested—the verdict of the coroner's jury, and the prompt burial of the unfortunate victim, had apparently closed that chapter permanently; while Almerido, posing as a Mexican lawyer, and invested with proper authority by power of attorney from the heiress, occupied a position of respectability and trust, unquestioned by those he had to deal with.

All he had to do was wait patiently, and the entire

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fortune would come tumbling easily into his hands. It was most simple; and to his mind, as well as Cowan's, must by this time appear devoid of danger. Nothing remained but to securely guard the real heiress from discovery until after they secured the money and had safely made their getaway.

And there was little to fear from this source. The young woman possessed no friends in Chicago. Wayne, the one person to whom she had desperately appealed for help, they thought had been safely disposed of, wounded unto death, and sent west in a box car, under guard. Doubtless by now Bill had duly informed them that their victim had been left a corpse on the train, with no means of identification on the body.

That settled that possibility of exposure. There was only one other—the unknown detective encountered in the Hartigan house. What he might know was problematical, but he would scarcely prove a source of danger, unless he got possession of the girl. There was no way of ascertaining the truth but through her testimony.

So assured were they now that Wayne had been put out of the way, and that the path before them was absolutely clear of danger, that they had come boldly out into the open, confident of success. Only one fact remained to breed fear in their minds, and render them cautious—Wayne's threatening words, revealing his knowledge of how Patrick Cullom had come to his death.

To be sure Wayne had been disposed of; but how had he come into possession of such knowledge? And did any other share his information? That question probably never gave the fellows a moment's rest; it would tend to keep them constantly on guard.

Wayne must have sat there for hours, oblivious to his

surroundings, his mind intent on the problem. With the tiles away the solution rested with him alone. He could not face it with professional calmness, waiting patiently for some new development.

It was not the crime which interested him, but the fate of Zaida Grayson. Not for a moment could he banish the girl from his mind; awake or asleep she called him.

And ever his thought led back to the same ending—Lilly Burke, and the possibility of his successfully impersonating that crook. If it could be done, if he dared attempt it, he might thus find a way into the mystery of Cooligan's place.

CHAPTER XVIII

FACING BAT HOOLIGAN

With the approach of night the temptation to essay the adventure became irresistible. It not only appealed to his naturally venturesome spirit, but it seemed easier than to remain quiet.

Yet even then he decided to proceed with caution, proposing merely to explore the neighborhood first, while permitting circumstances to determine the chances he would eventually take.

His preparations were simple, the secreting of a revolver in his pocket, and the exchange of his hat for a cap. Burke, Corcoran said, was a good dresser, and the cap pulled well down answered as a partial disguise; to attempt more would be likely to arouse rather than lull suspicion.

He was happier in this decision than he had been all day, and so certain of the outcome of the adventure that he left no message behind. What was the use? If anything serious resulted Corcoran would hear of his disappearance and connect the incident with his inquiry relative to Hooligan.

Wayne proceeded down Canal Street on foot, interested in studying the surroundings. It was a new section of the city to him, after leaving the immediate vicinity of the Union Depot. The blocks were occupied by manufacturing concerns, black and vacant at this hour of the night, the only illumination, except from dim arc lights

overhead, coming through numerous grimy saloon windows.

Only occasionally did he meet with pedestrians, and those of the rougher sort, who eyed him curiously as they passed. Further south the evidences of night-life became more pronounced, with cheap restaurants ablaze and well patronized, women as well mingling along the curb.

Several of the former spoke to him as he passed, but he left them without response. Indeed, the specimens of both sexes thus encountered only added to his vague uneasiness. They were emphatically of the underworld, making it clear by their appearance, as well as by scraps of conversation overheard, that he had invaded a new section of city life.

The few policemen he encountered stared into his face, as though endeavoring to recall his features to memory, so that, altogether, much of the courage had oozed out of him before he reached the exact locality he sought.

Hooligan's place was extremely well situated for the class of trade to which it very evidently catered. It occupied the corner basement of a three-story red-brick, an old, rather ramshackle building as revealed by the flaring electric light. The second-story windows were barred by iron gratings, with here and there a wooden balcony appearing, adding to the hideous appearance of it all.

Whether the floor on the street-level was occupied at all Wayne was unable to determine; there was no light and the windows were bare; except for numerous show-posters. Here and there lights gleamed from some of the windows farther above, while the only illumination before Hooligan's saloon-door was an electric cluster

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over the doorway, making clear the steps leading down.

This light shone brilliantly on the sign, "Pat's Place," but the curtains were all closely drawn, preventing any revealing glimpse of the interior. Nor did there seem to be much business going and coming through this entrance.

Wayne loitered in the shadows opposite for some time, but while he watched only four people entered—a man and woman together, and two men separately; one of the latter immediately returning to the street. The saloon on the north corner appeared to be doing far more business, a piano tinkling within mingling with the noise of voices.

A policeman rounded the corner and stood for a moment leaning over the iron rail, as though listening for some sound below, but finally passed on, swinging his night-stick. His eyes, although searching the shadows, failed to perceive Wayne crouched in a dark doorway, and after the sound of his heavy steps ceased the latter darted across the street, unable to remain quiet any longer.

There being nothing further to learn from a study of the front, he advanced up the side street as far as the narrow alley at the rear of the house. The windows were all dark, uncurtained, the immediate space within evidently unused. Half-way back a door confronted him, which he tried cautiously, only to discover that it was securely locked.

The button of an electric-bell tempted his finger, but, if this was a secret entrance, he was not yet ready to face the questions and scrutiny within. Instead, he slipped along into the alley at the rear, neither seeing nor hearing anything to alarm him.

It was so black here that he advanced only a few steps, coming to a rear cellar-entrance, strongly padlocked, and locating the folding lower section of an iron fire-escape.

He could have leaped up and reached this, but was fearful it might squeak under his weight; besides, the only light showing was far up in the third story.

If he was to enter the building at all the safest course to take would be to go boldly in through the saloon.

With this half determined upon he retraced his steps to the street. As he rounded the corner a man snuggled unseen against the wall suddenly laid a hand heavily upon his shoulder.

"Well, pal, what's all this snoopin' about?" snarled an unpleasant voice. "Don't cut no didoes now, or I'll let yer have it. What yer doin' round yere?"

Wayne stared into a square-jawed face, with an ugly protruding chin. His heart leaped into his throat, yet his brain was clear, and his voice steady.

"Looking for a chance to slip in without making a show," he answered, instantly feeling that this fellow, whoever he was, could be no friend of the law. "I'm keeping in the dark just now."

"Is that so? Well, what about it? Who was yer lookin' fer?"

"Bat Hooligan; but first I wanted ter talk with him alone, see?"

"Friend o' Bat's?"

"No, I ain't; never seen him, but he's a friend of a friend o' mine. I never did no work West; that's why I come here, because my friend said this place was all right, see?"

"Who's yer friend?"

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Wayne lowered his voice to a whisper, glancing cautiously about.

"Bob Howland."

"You a pal o' his?"

"Yes."

"Whar'd yer know Bob?"

"New York and along the coast."

"An' never know'd Bat?"

"No, I've never been in Chi before. Bob told me if I ever was, an' wanted ter hide-out, or get some junk off my hands, to hunt up Hooligan."

"What's yer monnicker?"

"Burke—Billy Burke."

The other ejaculated an oath and gripped Wayne's hand.

"By gum! I'm glad ter meet yer," he exclaimed. "My name's Murphy—Spike Murphy—I ain't in yer line, but I knows Bob Howland fer ten years, an' maybe ye've heard him speak about me.

"I was readin' terday how yer cleaned up in Cleveland—some sparklers, hey? Yer sure showed sense comin' yere fer a git-away.

"I'll git yer in to Bat. Seed anything of a patrolman 'long yere lately?"

"One went down Canal about ten minutes ago."

"That will be Casey; the Swede Hultgren has got the north beat, but he ain't due yet. It's a good time to beat it right now, pal. Stick close ter me."

Wayne had ventured so far that there was now no escape. To attempt to cut and run would defeat every hope; and indeed he had no inclination to waste the opportunity presented.

The very enthusiasm with which he had been greeted

by this Spike Murphy was evidence of the criminal reputation of Billy Burke, and also of the probability that he would pass muster within. Bat might ask some awkward questions, yet undoubtedly would accept him on faith, and the only real danger he assumed was a possible encounter with some one of Cowan's gang, who might recognize and denounce him.

If this occurred his life would not be worth the snap of a finger. He was walking straight into the lion's jaws—but the cause justified the risk. Such an opportunity might never present itself again, and he did not hesitate.

These thoughts flashed through his mind, but he kept close beside Spike, while the latter, with eyes covertly searching the street, pressed the call-bell with his finger.

"Bat owns this whole building?" he asked, to quiet his nerves more than anything else.

"Leases it," Spike growled, listening eagerly for some movement from within. "His partner runs a sorter hotel up-stairs; but yer ain't goin' ter run into nobody yer don't want ter see.

"It's all on the dead-quiet. Hooligan has his own rooms, an' he does a lot o' business, too, let me tell yer."

"On the quiet?"

"Sure; that you, Joe?" as a small wicket in the door disclosed a pair of eyes peering forth. "This is Spike; of course it's all right; oh, I know this guy as well as I do you. Slip her open while the street's clear."

The door must have been securely bolted and barred, and when it finally opened the space barely permitted their slipping through one at a time. Within was pitch darkness, but as soon as the fastenings were secured some one turned on an electric light, revealing a bare, wood-

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ceiled passageway leading back toward the center of the building.

The man who had manipulated the door was a young fellow, stoop-shouldered and rat-faced, with piercing black eyes and thin, cruel lips. He leaned against the wall, staring suspiciously at the newcomer.

"Yer never bin yere before," he said. "Who are yer? And what do yer want?"

"Now, see yere, Joe," broke in Murphy disgustedly, "you shut up, er I'll punch yer head. This yere is a friend o' mine, who wants ter talk private with Bat.

"I knows the guy, an' that's enough, see! Where is the ol' man?"

"In the bar, I reckon," sullenly, but evidently fearful of prodding Mr. Murphy too far. "But yer better leave this guy in the office till yer make sure; I ain't had sight of Bat since I come ter work."

With a grunt indicative to Wayne to follow him, Spike led the way along the narrow passage, which was barely high enough to enable them to remain erect. Joe seated himself on a bench by the door, and picked up a newspaper, although his suspicious eyes continued to follow the two.

Evidently the passage had been boxed in for a purpose, for it was unbroken by any opening either to right or left, ending in the main hallway of the building, opposite flights of stairs leading both up and down. The passage was a mere tunnel, but the hall to which it led was wide, with high ceilings and the staircases broad, protected with a strip of carpet.

There was straw matting on the floor, but the front entrance had been boarded up, so that no gleam of light could be seen from without. Spike took the

stairs leading down to the basement, and Wayne, realizing his helpless imprisonment, could do nothing but follow.

Clearly enough he was within a veritable castle of crime, his only hope of extricating himself resting upon nerve and good luck. However, it was too late to retreat; nothing remained but to act out the character he had assumed, and meet the consequences as best he might.

While outwardly calm and observant, his heart beat like a trip-hammer as Murphy threw open a door and bade him enter.

It was a basement apartment, but bore no visible resemblance to an underground room. The walls, unbroken by windows, and the ceilings were of wood, painted a dull gray. Only two doors were discernible, the one by which he had entered from the hall, and another apparently opening into the front bar.

The place was furnished rather sparsely as an office, a rug covering the floor, a paper cabinet against the further wall, a desk and a swivel-chair in the center, and a few ordinary chairs scattered about. The top of the desk was clear, unlittered by papers of any kind, while in one of the corners was a massive safe.

Two or three pictures, steel engravings, depicting country scenes, relieved the monotony of the gray walls. Indeed, the entire appearance of the interior resembled that of the office of a successful, methodical business man, and Wayne stared about in perplexity. It was not at all what he expected to find.

But Spike's only interest was in the absence of Hooligan.

"Sit down, Burke," he said, indicating a chair. "Must be Bat didn't hear the bell. That's his voice

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talkin' out there now; I'll go tell him who's yere."

He disappeared through the second door, and Wayne, still staring uneasily about, realizing how completely he was in the mouth of the trap, endeavored vainly to distinguish what was being said in the room beyond. The dull dreariness of the place in which he was waiting, the gray, windowless walls shutting him in, only added to the nerve strain under which he labored.

The orderly condition of the desk had its effect also, picturing to him the character of the man he was about to meet—cold, cautious, suspicious; a fellow whose life was spent dealing with criminals, ever playing a dangerous game, ever getting his blood-money.

To deceive one like Hooligan would prove far more difficult than he had supposed—he was no ordinary roughneck, but a shrewd manipulator, who would test him thoroughly. Yet, strangely enough, this knowledge only served to harden Wayne's purpose, left him more keen and alert for the encounter.

Now that he was in it he would play his cards; there was no other possible course, no other chance to win. The very imminence of danger cooled his blood and brought with it reckless audacity.

He dared not approach the closed door to learn what was transpiring without. Instead, to lull suspicion, he crossed the room, and, with back to the entrance, stood inspecting one of the pictures. He was thus engaged when Spike and another entered, and turned deliberately to face them, his eyes frankly meeting the inquiring gaze of Bat Hooligan.

The latter was a powerfully built man of sixty, with a heavy thatch of iron-gray hair, a keen, smoothly shaven face, and searching, light-blue eyes. It was an aggres-

sive face, ugly in a way, because of a long nose and thin lips.

He looked more Jewish than Irish, and the quick survey he made of the man waiting to see him was far from friendly. Wayne's impulse forced him instantly to grasp the bull by the horns.

"This is Bat Hooligan, I am sure," he said cordially, stepping forward with extended hand. "I would recognize you anywhere from Bob's description."

Hooligan responded, but rather stiffly, his grasp moist and relaxed, while his eyes continued to stare straight into those of the younger man.

"Bob who?" he asked, his voice thin and penetrating.

"Howland, of course; didn't Spike explain who I was?"

"He said you claimed to be Billy Burke," the dive-keeper returned coldly, "but I have to know men before I do business with them. What have you got to show?"

"Nothing," assuming a nonchalance he was far from feeling. "Take me, or fire me, as you please, Hooligan. I am not fool enough to run about Chi with my pockets full of identification papers.

"In fact, it was only twelve hours ago that I found it necessary to come here. My getaway was blocked, and I had to turn west. Then I thought of you, and how you'd always stood by Bob—so I headed in here. If I'm not welcome, I'll get out."

Hooligan stared at him in silence; then suddenly turned to Murphy.

"Wait in the bar till I send for you," he said sharply. "Sit down there, Burke, as you call yourself, and we'll talk a bit."

He waited until Spike disappeared, and then dropped

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heavily into the swivel-chair, leaning forward toward Wayne, with hands on his knees, and chin thrust forward.

"Now, young fellow," he said threateningly, "you talk straight, and I'll listen. You may be Billy Burke, and again you may not, but I reckon I'll find out, one way or another. Where did you ever know Bob Howland?"

From the reminiscences of Corcoran Wayne had absorbed sufficient details to render him confident of being able now to tell a story which would seem natural and true. Convinced that Bat only knew the general outlines of Howland's operations in the East he felt no hesitancy in adding details to the narrative.

"All right," he said, "ask me any darn thing you please. I know you, and you don't know me—so I'm not afraid to talk straight to you. How about a cigar first?"

Hooligan opened a drawer in the desk and produced a box, but took none himself. Wayne deliberately selected one and lighted it, his mind hastily arranging the form of his narrative. He appeared quite at ease, tossing his cap on the desk and leaning back in the chair.

"First time I've felt comfortable since I jumped out of Cleveland," he announced. "Police ever break in here?"

"No," gruffly. "Push ahead; I'm listening!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE ENTRANCE OF DORA

In spite of Hooligan's brusqueness of manner and speech, Wayne alertly watching the man through the haze of cigar smoke, felt satisfied that his own play-acting had told, and that suspicion had already changed into interest. With added confidence he began his story, sketching lightly but effectively his first meeting with Bob Howland, and some early incidents of their career together.

As he came down to matters on which Corcoran had spoken, and about which Hooligan also probably had some knowledge, he ventured to enter more into detail, mentioning dates and places. He did not speak as a braggart in crime, but related these occurrences simply, and in so convincing a way as to strongly impress Bat that he was telling the truth.

The latter asked few questions, his expressionless eyes either staring straight in front of him at the wall or else turning quickly on the speaker's face.

When Wayne paused, as if he had completed his narrative, the older man remained motionless for some minutes, nursing his knee.

"Do you know where Bob is now?" he asked bluntly.

"South America; Callao—last word I had."

"He's skipped to the Argentine. I heard from him a week ago; he mentioned your name."

"Said nothing of coming back?"

"No; he's doing well; he'll not dare to come back for

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a while yet. What about this last job of yours—Cleveland, wasn't it?"

"Yes; easy picking at a hotel, but an accident balled me up in the getaway."

"The papers credit it to you; how was that? Seen?"

"No; it's just the style of the job, I suppose. They haven't really anything on me, Hooligan, only suspicion that I was there about that time.

"All I need do is lie low till the affair blows cold, or they fasten on somebody else. You know a fly-cop in this town named Corcoran?"

"Sure—used to be down here; he's at headquarters. Why?"

"Well, I got in just about dark and dropped into an eating-place down in the loop. There were two guys at the next table, and one of 'em had a paper.

"I wouldn't noticed if they hadn't spoke my name; then naturally I listened. One was called Corcoran and the other answered to Bill."

"Bill Dermott likely—the chief."

"Maybe; he was a big, burly cuss; neither in uniform. Well, they were discussing my case, and Corcoran said that there was no evidence against me, nothing to convict on; just a blind guess of those Cleveland guys. I thought they were fly-cops from the way they talked."

Hooligan laughed, the incident appealing to his grim sense of humor.

"And you sit there at arm's length listening to those wise guys talk it over, hey? Maybe there ain't no evidence, as they said, but either one of them would give a month's pay to get a hand on you, just the same.

"Likely they'd both looked up your picture first thing that morning to have it fresh in mind. Corcoran drops

in here once in a while; next time I'll tell him that story—the damned whelp."

He reached into the desk-drawer and brought out a cigar, placing it between his lips without lighting.

"What was the swag?"

"Necklace, two rings and a pendant; if I am any judge, about seven thousand."

"Got them with you?"

"No; they're planted."

"Then you're not here to cash in?"

"Not now. I'll talk about that later, when it's safe. I'm flush enough, Bat; only I had to find some place to hide-out in for a few weeks; that's what brought me here."

Hooligan took time to think it over, too shrewd a fox to venture an opinion at once. Wayne, apparently indifferent, secretly watched him through the smoke wreaths, careful to avert his eyes as the fellow glanced his way.

In spite of his ease of manner he was far from sure that he had convinced the other of his identity, yet deemed it best to remain silent.

"I reckon you are Burke, all right," admitted Bat finally, "though I'd been more sure if you had brought a sparkler or two with you. Anyhow, you're about the kind of a guy that I took you to be from what Bob's said—so I'll take a chance.

"Glad you told me about what Bill Dermott and Corcoran had to say, 'cause if they was really after you they might come here, knowing about Howland being a friend o' mine.

"But I imagine they're not looking for you to turn up in Chi. They'll be hunting you down east, more

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likely. Yes, you're welcome to lie low here for a while, so you keep out of sight. I ain't looking for no trouble."

"No more am I, Hooligan. I'll be ready to beat it in a week. What do you want me to do?"

"Keep out of the barroom for one thing; there's fly-cops drop in there pretty regular. The closer you stick to the third story the safer you are. At that you won't be so darn lonesome; there's a few other stowaways about the house."

"Fellows hiding out?"

"Some; there generally is. Bob, he laid up here three times. That's one thing the beaks ain't got on to yet," he chuckled. "I ain't been raided in ten years."

"They got an idea I may pick up a good thing once in a while, and occasionally a smooth guy drifts along; but this is about as far as he ever gets. Another feller—my partner—runs the up-stairs and there's never been no complaint of him at headquarters. He'll likely want some money—how are you heeled?"

"Oh, I've got plenty; what's the price?"

"Room and eats—for you won't want to go out—about five bucks a day. We ain't here for our health, you know. That all right?"

"Of course, old man; I've paid more. Who else is here?"

"Nobody you know; besides, that's something I never tell. You'll meet them likely, and if they want to talk it's none of my business—only I'll give you a pointer: you better lie to them if they question you; they ain't your kind. Want to go up?"

Wayne arose, picking up his cap and putting it on.

He felt confident, eager; he had successfully passed

the first test, the cold scrutiny of Hooligan, yet did not feel entirely at ease under the man's cold eyes. Perhaps he believed his story, perhaps he did not and was setting a trap to deceive.

Anyhow, the younger man experienced a strong desire to be alone where he could think calmly and decide upon his future action.

Convinced as he was that Cowan's gang was actually concealed in the place—that probably they held Zaida Grayson prisoner there—he had no intention of withdrawing, yet he wanted to get safely away from the unpleasant presence of Hooligan, to where he could investigate on his own account.

The mystery of those upper floors beckoned him—he was glad to go.

"Might as well," he assented carelessly, "for I haven't had any sleep for two nights; I could snooze round the clock—"

He turned sharply, aware that some one had opened the door leading into the bar and stood in the entrance. His eyes rested in astonishment on a young woman, a blonde, with wide open-blue eyes, a rather querulous mouth and cheeks so red as to suggest rouge.

She was a bit overdressed, yet undeniably pretty in a bold, striking way. His stare embarrassed the lady not at all, but her answering gaze of interest shifted quickly to Hooligan, who still sat heavily in his chair.

"I thought you were alone," she said, her voice scarcely as agreeable as her face. "Spike did not tell me that you had a visitor."

"We're through. Come on in and get acquainted," and Bat smiled. "This is a new boarder, a traveler

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from New York—Mr. Burke, my daughter, Dora.”

She swept forward, an ungloved hand extended, her eyes bright.

“Mr. Burke?” a slight hesitancy in her speech. “From New York? Do your friends call you Billy?”

“And also my enemies.”

“Why, I am so glad to meet you. Of course I know who you are. We have callers from New York every once in a while—don’t we, papa? And, besides, you are quite famous just now.”

“Altogether too much so,” the young man admitted, “for my comfort, Miss Hooligan; but,” he added gallantly, “it has, at least, given me the pleasure of your acquaintance.”

“Don’t mind her, Burke,” broke in the father indulgently. “She does all her talking inside and not on the street. She’s on to the game, and never spills nothing.”

“I can well believe that, and realize now the great advantages of being a guest here. You spoke of a room?”

“Who is in front there, Dora?”

“Spike and a couple of floaters; with old Galvin asleep in one corner.”

“It will be safer to go up the other way.”

He crossed over to a key-board, from which he selected one, coming back with it in his hand.

“How about you showing Burke up? I am getting too old to climb stairs.”

She laughed, with a swift side glance at the young man as she grasped the key.

“Why, of course. It is quite an honor—you are not afraid, Mr. Burke?”

“Yes, but I am,” protested the make-believe, eager to

make a good impression, "for you are dangerous. However, I face the peril willingly as a volunteer."

"That was very nicely said, and I accept the sacrifice; we will go this way."

She opened the same door by which Wayne had entered the room, and, closely following her, he emerged again into the outside hall. Hooligan had sunk back into his chair, his eyes gazing into vacancy, his mind indifferent to their departure.

The two mounted the stairs together in the dim glow of a single-shaded globe, the girl talking rapidly, and the man merely murmuring his response. He glanced aside at the outline of his companion's face, striving to read more clearly her character.

She was fascinating in a way, decidedly pretty, yet as certainly without that distinction of class to which he had been accustomed. Indeed, he scarcely knew exactly how to classify her to his satisfaction; she evidently belonged to another world.

Crime could not mean to her what it did to him; she had been brought up breathing its atmosphere. These surroundings, familiar since childhood, had stamped themselves on mind and manner.

She was doubtless a fiery little vixen, true to the distorted code of her world, loyal to those of her circle, not particularly intellectual, yet no fool. How far could he go with her under the guise of friendship? How great was her confidence in him? What questions could he ask, without arousing her suspicion?

These were some of the queries rapidly assailing his mind as they mounted the stairs together, her words reaching his ears almost meaningless.

His greatest interest centered about her name—Dora.

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Could there be two Doras connected so strangely, or could it be possible that he actually had stumbled upon the same girl who had visited Zaida in the Hartigan house, and had later masqueraded as the granddaughter of Patrick Cullom?

He scarcely could grasp the thought as his eyes studied the animated face beside him; and yet, why not? She certainly possessed the boldness, the daring, to assume such a part, and it was scarcely likely that her life-training had been such as to leave her averse to this kind of crime.

If, as he had some reason to believe, Cowan and his gang had found shelter here; if they were criminally connected with her father, it would be most natural that she also should be involved in the plot.

Indeed, he had convinced himself that this must be true, but a look at her laughing eyes exploded the whole theory.

"Why so glum, Mr. Burke?" she questioned. "It may not be so bad as you think."

"I am dog-tired," he answered, for lack of some better explanation. "To-morrow you'll find me lively enough."

"I sure hope so," she confessed frankly, "for you surely do not look like a dummy. Then my kindness to-night must take a different form. All right, here's the room—it is evident it is not entertainment but a bed that you want."

He paused in the open door and took her hand.

"Do not think me ungrateful," he urged, feeling the reproach in her voice and instantly regretful of his indifference, "but really I am tired. No, don't go yet; tell me, is this place quite safe?"

"No one knows, of course," she answered frankly, her eyes searching his face, "where the police may strike, but they have not raided this building for years. Father pays for protection and controls a large vote. If you have not been shadowed there is no danger."

"But there are others hiding here?" he ventured.

She laughed in good humor.

"No one the department is after—just a bunch who prefer keeping out of sight for a while. They are not your class, Mr. Burke; nobody wants them."

"Some underhand game?"

"Well," she admitted, "naturally it is not the sort they care to advertise. This hotel wouldn't last long if we was after first-class trade."

"Say," he exclaimed, encouraged by her manner, and determined to take the plunge, "this ain't the gang in that Cullom deal, is it?"

"What do you know about that?" surprised, and instantly on guard.

"Mighty little, but just enough to be curious. For if they are they are not so far underground as you think. The police are on to them, and I don't want to get tangled up in that net."

"The police are on? How?"

The sparkle had gone from her eyes, the color from her cheeks, except for the spots of rouge. She stepped inside the room, closed the door, and faced him.

"Now, see here," she said swiftly, her whole manner of speech changing, "talk straight to me. Where did you hear about this?"

CHAPTER XX

ON THE FIRE-ESCAPE

"Then they are here?"

"Never mind about that; I know about the case, in a way. Some friends of mine are connected with it. What I want to learn is what you know.

"You told the old man you just blew in from New York, didn't you? That you was Billy Burke? Well—explain!"

Wayne drew a deep breath, but kept cool. He had touched a raw spot, and with a word had changed this smiling girl into a raging fury. Good, he understood her better now, and realized that he was upon the right track.

All he needed to do to gain the information desired was to play carefully the cards he held in his hand. The gods had been kind!

"Now, don't go off half-cocked!" he protested. "All I know won't hurt anything, only I thought that if this bunch was here you ought to be told. According to what you just said you had no idea the police was on to their racket. That's where you're off, and I'd be a fine pal if I didn't tell you—wouldn't I?"

"Yes," slightly mollified, "but let me have it straight. Where did you catch on to all this?"

"I told Hooligan down below," he explained soberly, "how I sat at a table in a restaurant a couple of hours

or so ago, next to some fly-cops who were discussing my case."

"Who were they? Do you know?"

"From my description your dad named them as Dermott and Corcoran—headquarters' stiff!"

She nodded, her lips shut tight.

"Well, after they talked me over a while, and decided I'd most likely head east, they drifted into this other affair. I wasn't interested, yet couldn't help hearing some things they said, and, somehow, when you was talking just now, it occurred to me this might be the same gang—is there a fellow called Cowan in it?"

"Yes," reluctantly, but carried away by her interest. "What was it the guys said—that they were here?"

"No; they don't know where they are. It seems some guy drifted into their office with the story—a novelist chap."

"His name's Wayne; they won't get nothing more out of him."

"How's that? He's been fixed?"

"Oh, he's fixed, all right; never you mind what happened; but if all they've got is what that guy told them, they'll not go very far. Bah! You had me going for fair, but if it's only the talk of this fellow Wayne—I should worry!"

"You know him, then?"

"Me? I should say not. What was it those fly-cops said?"

"They had been hunting after Cowan, believing him to be a guy named Ike Hartigan?"

"They were? Did they mention my father?"

"No."

"Then to the devil with them, Mr. Burke! Don't stay

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awake worrying about that bunch ; they 'll not come here ! Good night !''

Wayne stared at the closed door through which the girl had vanished, and then about the room. He smiled to himself, yet it was not a happy smile. He had succeeded even beyond expectations, good fortune had been with him all the way, yet even now he was in desperate peril, and not altogether satisfied that he was unsuspected.

The inscrutable face of Hooligan puzzled him ; what the man really thought could not be guessed at, and now, if Dora returned below with a report of this conversation, the result might be far from pleasant. However, he had faith that he had thoroughly deceived them both, and must proceed on that theory.

He rather liked the girl ; she was frank and friendly, but this was no time for him to forget that, in spite of laughing eyes and red mouth, she was part of a criminal conspiracy which he had set out to solve. Indeed, at that moment his life hung in the balance, and once the purpose of his presence should be known, no one would turn on him quicker than this same girl—the soft purring kitten would be transformed into a wildcat, more to be dreaded than either Cowan or Almerido.

And danger of such discovery was ever present ; each moment of delay added to his peril. He was already helplessly in the clutch of these people ; no courage could save him once his real identity became revealed, and it was scarcely possible he could pass a day within the confines of this building without encountering some recognition.

Even if the suspicions of Hooligan and his daughter had been lulled, there remained others likely to meet

him face to face at any instant. No explanation would convince them that he was Billy Burke; and no mercy would be shown an impostor.

This was a case of murder as well as robbery, and his life would mean nothing to such a crew. No, he dare not wait; he must work at once, to-night, under cover of darkness.

It was a bare, desolate room in which he stood. Evidently guests came there from necessity rather than choice, and no effort was expended in making their surroundings homelike.

The walls were bare, dirty, unpapered; adorned only with numerous cracks in the rough plaster. The bed was poorly made and far from clean, sagging sadly in the middle; a cracked mirror hung opposite the one window; the floor was uncovered, except for a small, shabby rag-rug, and there were two chairs, one a broken rocker which threatened to collapse beneath his weight.

The light revealing all this came from a feeble glimmer of gas, which Wayne, after his one glance about, immediately extinguished. In the darkness he felt his way across to the window, lifting the curtain and peering without. The room opened upon the rear alley, and, just beyond the ledge on which he perched in uncertainty, the fire-escape, previously noticed from below, led up toward the roof.

He remembered the light gleaming from the window above, and leaned far out, endeavoring to learn if it was still burning. He could barely assure himself that it was, and it became a strange attraction.

What should he do? In what direction could he venture?

The girl had revealed nothing as to where these oth-

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ers were quartered, and he dared not ask any direct questions. The building was large, rambling, many of the rooms probably unoccupied, and the halls dimly lit.

To be discovered prowling about at that hour, with no satisfactory excuse, would expose everything. He was in a den of thieves, where the slightest false movement would inevitably result in suspicion and discovery.

He could not even feel convinced he was not already watched and spied upon. He stole across to the door, opened it silently, and peered out into the deserted hall.

It was barely revealed by a flickering gas-jet burning at the head of the stairs, but no light shone forth from any transom to indicate an occupied room, and the stillness was profound. The creak of a board in the ill-matched floor would sound like a crack of thunder—besides, where could he go in search? It would be suicidal to try door after door.

His mind had centered on one purpose. He had entered the place blindly, but now that he had thoroughly discovered its character, only one object remained in his mind—the rescue of Zaida Grayson. The crime could wait for solution, but she must be brought to safety, taken from this horrible hole, and placed beyond the reach of those who held her prisoner. All else seemed small and unworthy.

With this thought dominating action, his mind reverted to the opportunity presented by the fire-escape. Here, at least, was a chance to learn something, and he determined to try it.

To thus determine on a course of action was easier than to carry it out. The first serious obstacle confronting him was the four feet of sheer wall extending between the window-ledge, where he perched, and the iron guard

of the fire-escape. A narrow brick coping promised a slight foothold, yet, even risking this, the passage would be impossible without some hand-grip.

The black alley lay some forty feet below, and a fall probably meant death. The single sheet on the bed was coarse and strong; he dragged it forth and twisted it into a rope, cutting strips with which to bind it within a small compass.

The light extinguished behind, he hung out, astride the window-sill, clinging to the upper sash with one hand, and, with the other, endeavored to cast the loop over the end of an iron upright. The throw failed again and again, but the movement was noiseless, and Wayne persevered, realizing this to be his only hope, and finally had the joy of seeing the loop settled firmly over the head of the support.

He drew the line taut, carefully fastening the other end to a hook on the inner wall, the strength of which he tested by the full weight of his body.

Satisfied with these preparations, and again assuring himself that no eavesdropper lurked in the hall, he made final scrutiny of the alleyway. Danger of observation there lay largely in the coming of some prowling patrolman, this doubtless being a neighborhood rather carefully guarded at night, but he could perceive no movement below.

Once safely across he would be too high up to be observed against the black shadow of the fire-escape unless he came within the radius of a light streaming from an uncurtained window. It was a ticklish job, the brick coping being little more than two inches broad, and the twisted sheet could not be drawn tightly enough to prevent sagging.

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However, Wayne was desperate enough to essay the venture. Slipping his shoes into his pockets, and gripping the narrow ledge with stocking feet, he made the passage, inch by inch, his heart almost ceasing to beat as he crept forward. Once a foot slipped, but he was far enough along to fling his body instantly to the right and grasp the iron rail with his fingers.

Weak and unnerved he clambered up and sank onto the platform, for the moment completely unmanned.

With the return of courage he stared down through the iron grating at the black void beneath, but heard or saw nothing to render him apprehensive of discovery. The slight noise made by his scrambling for safety had evidently not been overheard. As his strength returned, he began climbing the ladder leading up to the story above.

Before he attained the level of the window he became aware that the curtain had been drawn, and that the only emission of light streamed through a narrow space at the bottom. This compelled him to lie flat on the floor of the landing to gain a glimpse within, yet concealed him from any possible observation. Moving like a snail and scarcely venturing to breathe, he attained a position with eyes at the crack.

The first glimpse within set his heart throbbing. He could not only see but hear, for the curtain had been left up a scant inch and the window was slightly open to yield the occupants fresh air.

Three stories up the thought of a prowler without had never occurred to one among them; indeed the fellows were so thoroughly convinced of their safety — of having covered their trail — as to sneer at any possible danger.

The room into which Wayne peered cautiously was revealed entirely. It was an apartment somewhat larger than the one below, although no better furnished, and was occupied by four persons, all of whom he instantly recognized.

The Mexican lay on the bed, his head bandaged, as a result of his late fall, no doubt, but propped up on two pillows, and taking full part in the conference. Steve Groggin sat beside a small deal table shuffling a pack of cards restlessly, a black bottle and several glasses before him. Cowan's chair tilted against the wall, his feet on a rung, a pipe gripped in his teeth, while the girl, Dora, stood with back against the door, facing the group, and talking. Plainly enough she had but just entered, and still occupied her first position.

Two gas-jets were burning brightly, clearly revealing the expression of each face, and, judging from the scowl on the countenance of Cowan, he was far from being in good humor.

"What were yer so long about?" he blurted out bluntly, sucking at his pipe. "Yer was ter have been yere an hour ago."

Dora tossed her head indifferently, her bold eyes surveying the three men.

"Was I? I didn't know there was any time set. You said you had something to talk over, an' for me to come up here when I got in—it's about to-morrow, ain't it?"

"Yes; but that's no reason why we should wait up for you all night. Where you been—out on the street again?"

"I don't know as that is any of your business, Ike!" she replied defiantly, darting an ugly look at the sprawl-

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ing giant. "If I'd spill what I know about you, you'd have a worse place to wait in than this. Because I helped out on this job doesn't make me fetch and carry every time you growl.

"What's more, I've had enough of it, and you can get that putty-faced snip upstairs to do the rest of your dirty work! I'm darned if I'm at your orders any longer! Put that in your pipe and smoke it!

"Of course I was outside, but I'm not fool enough to be seen where it 'll do any harm. I got to have some fresh air, ain't I? However, I was in an hour ago."

"Then why didn't you come here?"

"Oh, a lad blew in from New York that I wanted to see; I got him under cover first."

"Who was he?"

"Nobody in your line, but the real thing, just the same. Come on now, quit your grouch and give me the office! What's the play?"

"Some papers ter sign up at the bank—that'll 'bout finish it."

"For me to sign her name?" she asked in consternation. "You mean I'm to walk into that bank and sign up before a bunch?"

"Not on your life, I don't! I'll play a character-part, just for the fun of it, but I don't run my head into no noose. I'm too wise a bird for that!"

"What do yer mean?" and Cowman's chair came down on the floor. "Yer goin' back on us now?"

"Maybe that's what I mean," she retorted savagely. "And what's more, ye're not the kind as can bully me. I know too much; that's what makes me leery of this whole game.

"When I went into it your scheme sounded all right;

it looked easy the way you laid it out, and I fell for the game. I didn't mind masquerading a while, just for the fun of it.

"But now it's a dirty mess! Oh, you think I don't know anything, but I do!"

"What do you know, you cursed spitfire?"

"I know this," slowly and distinctly, "that if I go to that bank to-morrow and sign those papers, I'm liable to be facing a murder charge!"

"Murder! What murder?"

"Patrick Cullom's, if you want me to speak out. Oh, he was killed, all right—I know that, and I'll bet I could name the guy who did it! You have got away with the job, so far, of course, but that don't mean it 'll never leak out.

"What's become of that author fellow who got his nose into the affair? He knew what was up."

"He's out of the way, Dora!" spoke up Groggin confidently.

"You mean he's fixed?"

"He's done for—shipped out—freighted West, 'long with Bill Stone and Shorty; he's taken care of."

"Croaked?"

"Well, he won't ever likely come back."

"Then that makes two; and you've got the nerve to ask me to go in and sign them papers with those two guys plugged? Me to stay here in Chi? Not on your life!"

"Oh, let up on the pipe-dream!" and Cowan got to his feet heavily. "This thing is a cinch, if you only play out yer part.

"There ain't nobody been croaked; that guy Wayne is put out of the way fer a while, but that don't mean

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nothing. And, far as Cullom is concerned, he died natural 'nough, and is planted—"

"That's a lie, Ike!" the girl broke in excitedly, "and I know it. Wasn't I in his office? Did you think I was blind? What if the coroner did give us a clean bill—his won't be the first corpse dug up in this town!

"You got the guy Wayne safe, have you? Well, what about the other one?"

"What other one?"

"The fellow who got out of the cellar the same time Wayne did. You've got no line on him, not even his name. That's the guy I'm afraid of—he's free, and he knows too much.

"It's all right; you can take all the chances you please, but you don't kid me along any further. If you fellows want those other papers signed, you'll find some sucker besides Dora Hooligan to do the job—that's flat!"

"Yer mean ter turn us down cold?"

"Nothing doing; I never turned down any pal, an' you know it. I just stop—that's all. I've gone my limit.

"Get the real one to do the signing; she did it before; put the screws to her and she'll come across. Almerido there can frame up some fairy-story to do the biz! There ain't any fly-cop going to get my handwriting to study over; you can bet your life on that!"

She was outside, the door tightly closed, before Cowan could halt her exit. He stood baffled, his hand gripping the knob, cursing impotently at the blank wood.

"To hell with the wench!" he snorted. "What's frightened her, I'd like ter know? She has sure ditched us. S'pose she knows anything special, Don?"

Almerido slipped his feet over the edge of the bed and sat up, his evil eyes glittering with passion.

"No; what you call col' feet! I trus' no weemen—nevair! Zay always blow oop—so, like zat! Maybe eet better as she zay—we make ze ozzer one do ze job!"

"But can you?"

"Why not, *señor?*" cunningly, spreading his palms. "She do what I say once."

"Yes, she did at first; but now she is hep to our scheme. That guy Wayne put her wise!"

"Sure, *amigo*, but she fear. See, I zink eet out, so—ve take her back home an' put her in ze bed. She be seek, so ze banker mus' come zere for get ze paper signed—what?"

"I stan' beside while she do what I say, an' she know ze gun is wiz me. What you t'ink she do zen, *señor*—write ze name or talk? She be 'fraid to say one word, I bet you she sign!"

"You'll have to scare her good an' plenty!" growled Cowan, unconvinced. "She's got ugly since we brought her up here."

"Oh, I scare her, *señor!* I know ze way to do zat. But ve mus' act now vile eet remain night. She mus' say yes now, an' zen we take her back—she be so glad to go back she promise enyzing."

"You think so? You're liable to be fooled in the girl, Don!"

"Not me!" chuckling. "I know her, an' I win; she ees a womans. You go now an' hav' Nell bring her here!"

"Here?"

"'Tis as I say. I'll be dress' then. I would talk wiz her just by ourselves. I tame that spitfire!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE GIRL'S CHOICE

The two men disappeared, taking the bottle with them, and Almerido dressed hastily, smoothed the ruffled bed back into shape, and waited, lighting a cigarette, at which he sucked impatiently.

Wayne scarcely changed his position, or removed his eyes from the figure within the room. Once the Mexican approached the window, and the young man crouched lower, instantly returning to his post again when assured that the curtain remained untouched.

Just what Almerido proposed doing he could not determine; what nature of threat he intended to employ; yet, surely, his place was to keep as close as possible and learn all he could.

He had gathered some information of value already—the girl, Dora, was convinced that Cullom had been deliberately murdered; she even suspected who had done the deed.

Whether her information was personal or merely hearsay and suspicion, he could not determine; but it was clear that she would talk rather than suffer the consequences herself. No doubt she knew enough to furnish Stiles with the clue he sought, if he could interview her alone.

The one dominating conception in Wayne's mind was the approach of Zaida Grayson. He was going to see her again, hear her speak, gain a fresh view of the girl's

character. The knowledge excited him strangely.

In a vague way he had realized her influence over him, the interest he felt in her personality. It was really for her sake he was undertaking this venture, assuming this risk.

The pathetic appeal in the eyes of that strange girl who had passed him in the park had never been forgotten. He had met her twice since, under conditions most peculiar, most unsatisfactory, and yet the first impression had only grown the stronger—she had become to him an ideal, a dream. He found it useless to analyze this new sensation; hopeless to attempt to control it.

Without a word of love expressed between them, without even a glance, she had become a part of his life. The very thought of seeing her again, even as a prisoner in the hands of these villains, set his pulses throbbing. And there might be a chance for him to act, if only she and the Mexican were to be alone in the room.

Almerido was nervous, yet, plainly enough, confident as to the result. He paced the floor, lighting another cigarette, examined a revolver, which he thrust back out of sight in his pocket, and then paused, listening for some noise in the hall outside.

Hearing nothing, he extracted a flat bottle from beneath the pillow and indulged in a drink, hiding it again quickly and straightening up as a hand touched the knob of the door. As the door opened the light fell on the face of Nell Brennon.

"Dan said you wanted her?"

The Mexican grinned, exposing his yellow teeth, in an effort to look pleasant.

"*Sí*; bring her in."

He swept the floor in exaggerated courtesy.

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" 'Tis with regret I call you, *señorita*, at such an hour, but eet iss mos' important."

The girl emerged from the darkness of the hall into the lighted room and advanced a few steps. She was fully dressed, and her eyes surveyed the apartment swiftly, finally concentrating on the gesticulating Mexican. There was an expression of perplexity on the uplifted face, but no trace of fear.

"For what purpose, *señor*?"

"To be explained to you only," he answered, straightening his figure, the thin lips hardening as he recognized her spirit of defiance. "Eet will not take long."

His eyes sought the woman in the open doorway.

"You go, and wait above till I call."

"You mean I am to remain alone with you—you beast?" broke in Zaida, startled. "Wait! Nell, don't leave me!"

The door closed in her face, while, even as her fingers gripped at the knob, Almerido sprang forward, flung her roughly aside, and turned the key in the lock. He was grinning cheerfully as he thrust the bit of metal into his pocket, and again confronted her, with back firmly planted against the locked door.

"Oh, no, yer don', *señorita*," he sneered, well satisfied with his tactics. "I am not zat kind of a fool. Now, you stay here, an' listen till I say go—see? You not trust me eny more—what?"

She stood motionless, the fear in her eyes turning to hatred as they stared into his face.

"Trust you! I know you too well to ever trust you again. There is no crime you are incapable of committing; what further outrage do you contemplate?"

"You flatter me, *señorita*. I fear, from the look in

your eyes, it must indeed prove as you say. I sent for you, hoping to gain your help in a matter of importance."

"Then why send away the others? Why lock the door?"

"Because this is private; nor would you remain otherwise to hear me through."

"Is that all?"

He hesitated for the fraction of a second, but the unveiled contempt in her tone angered the fellow.

"No, *señorita*, eet ees not all. I speak to you ze truth—you will say yes, whether eet please you or not. I make you say eet."

"Oh, will you? Well, Juan Almerido, let me say to you that I am not afraid of your threats. I hate and despise you beyond words."

"Good! I am not sorry; eet make ze task easiaire. We need no longer pretend to be ze friends—eh? We play no more; you t'ink me a fox, but you will find me a tiger."

"I think you what you are. Heaven knows I've had reason to learn the truth. You are all that is vile and inhuman. You are a murderer and a thief."

"I know the whole story now, and yield to you no longer. You have lied to me from the first, over the dead body of my father, and have brought me here to-night to lie to me again."

"What you mean, that I am a murderer and thief?"

"Just what I say—your object is my grandfather's money; to gain that end you have been driven to murder—"

"What murder?"

"The killing of Stuart Wayne."

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"Who tole you zat lie?"

"It is no lie. Cowan boasted of it in my presence, and then I made Nell Brennon tell me the whole story. He was beaten unconscious while striving to serve me, and thrown dying into a freight-car.

"Since then you have received word that he did die. Now, you believe that you can compel me to do your will. Listen to me, Almerido!"

He stared at her, breathing hard, his yellow fangs exposed like the teeth of a dog.

"You be damned!" he muttered. "Don't say too much."

"I'll say all I care to say; I'll do nothing more for you—nothing! I'll be your catspaw no longer. You can kill me if you dare—but you will not dare, for you are too great a coward. But I tell you this, Juan Almerido; if I live you are going to pay for Stuart Wayne's death.

"I'll never rest until you do. I might forgive the loss of a fortune—but not that! He gave his life for me. I'll never forget that."

"Bah! he stick his nose in—you love him."

"Love him! Why, I only saw him twice. But he was worth love, any woman's love; and he died in an effort to save me. Do you suppose I'll ever forget that?"

"What do I care if you forget?" he snarled savagely. "Shut up, w'ile I tell you somezings. When you get free, zen you talk all you like—I care not, for zen I shall be in my own land, away from zese dogs.

"But now you do what I say, or it be ze worse for you—see? You know vere you are?"

She glanced about with a shudder, her eyes fixed upon

the heavy glass on the table. Then, with an effort, she looked again into his face.

"In some thieves' den, I suppose."

"Call it so; ze poleece not come here—nevair. You scream—no one hear—you die, no one know or care."

His eyes gloated, blazing directly into her own.

"You here alone, wiz me, locked in. Only for one t'ing I unlock ze door, an' you go free. Refuse, an' I make you pay ze price. You know what zat mean—eh?"

She looked at him, her eyes widening with horror; there was no mistaking his meaning.

"You beast!" she burst forth, but with a single involuntary step backward. "Put one hand on me, and I will kill you!"

"Keel me! Bah; you ver' pretty girl; I crush you like zis, if I please," opening and shutting his hands meaningly. "You keel me! Wat you keel with?"

"See! I haf ze way to keel—not you; how eet look, zis knife? You want eet slash so, across zat white throat? How you keep me away? I tell you, an' when you say yes, I open the door."

"What is your proposition?"

"That sounds like sense," he exclaimed, and stepped forward, grinning, but she threw out her hands.

"Keep back! If you have anything to say—say it! But keep back; I'll talk to you in no other way."

"We see how you talk. But first I tell you what I want. Lees'en; zere are papers to be signed at ze bank; eet ees ze American law; no one can sign but you—"

"Relating to the property left by my grandfather?"

"*Sí, señorita.*"

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"And if I sign, it opens the way for you to rob me of all?"

Almerido spread his hands in a gesture signifying resignation.

"No—no, *señorita*; I am not a robber. I but keep my pledge to your father, and ask only a fair commission for ze service. You misunderstand."

"Pledge to my father! Did he pledge you to keep me prisoner—to hold me helpless in such a den as this—to make the horrid threat I have just listened to?"

"But, *señorita*," he pleaded, "all has been for ze best. There are those who would rob you, but not Juan Almerido.

"I am your friend, as I was ze friend of your father. If I threaten, eet ees that I so make you do what ees best. Once you trust me, now—not?"

"No; I am not sure I ever did; certainly not now."

"So I t'ink, but you do w'at I say. I not ask any more; I tell you w'at you do, an' you do zat—else—"

He spread his hands in a gesture of finality.

Her back was to the table, and Wayne marked her fingers close about the heavy drinking-glass; otherwise the girl made no movement.

"Then I must go with you to the bank and sign those papers?"

"Not to the bank—no"—cunningly. "You will be seek, at home; the banker, he come to you zere."

"At home, *señor*? Where we were before?"

"*Si*; eet will be quiet zere—just ze banker an' you an' I."

"Exactly; I understand what you mean—where I can make no outery, create no alarm. Where you can con-

ceal all your gang and compel me to do just as you please. And if I refuse to go—what?”

The Mexican's grin became a savage snarl.

“I tol' you, *señorita*; I *make* you so you go. I play wiz you all zese weeks past, an' treat you good. Now, eet ees no more like zat.

“I hav' you here, alone. You scream, no one hear you, no one care what happen. We oop four, five story—no one keep me from you. I do w'at I please; you promise me, or—I show you w'at you be afraid of.

“You t'ink you scare me wiz your eyes? Bah! I crush you—so!”

She stepped backward around the edge of the table toward the window, the hand held behind her yet grasping the thick glass. Wayne could no longer see her face, but the poise of her figure told him of her desperation. She understood to the full the meaning of Almerido's horrible threat; the necessity of keeping beyond his grasp.

“Do not touch me, you beast!” she said coldly. “I warn you!”

“You'll not sign?”

“No.”

“You know wat zat mean?”

“Yes, I know; but I doubt if you do. I have made my choice—only one of us will go out from here alive.”

“Alive! Bah! You t'ink I keel? No such fool! Why I do zat? You no good to me dead. Ah! I see—eet ees ze window! I block zat!”

Closely as she watched, the fellow's movement was too swift. His was the deadly leap of a tiger, half across the room. The impact of his body flung her back against

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the frame of the window, as the lean, yellow fingers of one hand closed firmly on her throat.

She wrenched partly free, shattering a pane of glass in the effort, but with the heavy tumbler still gripped in her free hand. His eyes glared into her own, frenzied with passion, seeing nothing but the face of his victim.

"You play hell—you—"

She struck, with all her might, driving the thick edge of the glass against his temple. He released his grip to fling up one arm, but he was too late; the heavy glass crashed against his head. She wrenched herself free, stumbling blindly, sidewise, to the floor, while, with a single faint moan, Almerido plunged forward, half across the sill, hanging there, limp, and, to all appearance, lifeless.

Wayne forced the sash up with difficulty. He could see the girl huddled face downward on the floor, and his only thought was to reach her, but the body of the Mexican blocked the way. To open the passage he dragged the fellow out on to the iron platform, and turned to creep through the opening into the room.

Revived by the fresh air, or brought to consciousness by his rough handling, Almerido gripped the legs of his antagonist, tripping him to the grating in a death struggle.

CHAPTER XXII

THE CHOICE MADE

The surprise he experienced at thus finding the Mexican a combatant nearly led to Wayne's defeat. He had believed the fellow knocked out, if not dead from the smashing blow the girl had struck him; at least rendered unconscious.

Instead, Wayne found himself in a grasp of steel, thrown heavily, and only saved from plunging down into the black alley beneath by being fortunately wedged against the iron hand-rail.

Nor did Almerido give him time for thought, or opportunity to gain any position of advantage. Blinded, as the villain was by the blood dripping from his jagged wound, unable in the dim light to see the face of his antagonist, he nevertheless fought like a demon, sensing the peril of his own situation and being determined to save himself at any cost.

The fall had sent Wayne to the outer edge of the narrow platform, and, for an instant, he could do no more than cling desperately to the hand-rail, thus baffling the Mexican's frantic efforts to dislodge him. Then, with one arm, and both legs he gripped the brute, driving his head under the fellow's chin, and, by an immense effort, succeeded in turning the man flat on his back.

Mad with fear, Almerido sank his teeth into the flesh of Wayne's arm as the two rolled back and forth in the

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savage struggle. Neither man uttered a sound, except for the hissing breath between their teeth, as they strained with every muscle for some advantage.

The Mexican was like a bundle of steel, but the loss of blood had weakened him, and Wayne's younger strength told to his advantage. Twice he jerked an arm loose, and struck, jarring the fellow's head against the iron floor.

The beastly grip of those locked jaws maddened him with pain, and drove him to retaliation. At last he got what he wanted—a firm grasp of the side-rail enabling him to drag his body upward, jerking Almerido along with him.

Once upon his feet, with his back to the wall, the dazed Mexican still clinging to him desperately, he struck full at the man's face with every ounce of his weight behind the clenched fist.

The stricken man went staggering back, his fingers clawing at the air, hit the low hand-rail, and, whirling over and over in his fall backward, went down into the dark.

There was a dull crunch as the body struck the paving-stones below.

Wayne, trembling, breathless, his hands gripping the rail, stared down into the black void, barely conscious of what had occurred. Nothing moved, no sound reached him; the dim light at the alley entrance revealed no motion; the rays did not penetrate to where the crushed, shapeless figure lay. He was dead, of course—dead!

Wayne had no sense of remorse, no regret; yet it was difficult for the truth to penetrate his mind. He felt dazed, bewildered, unable to quite comprehend how it had all happened. The pain in his arm, where the

ute's teeth had lacerated the flesh, served to restore his faculties; he straightened up, drawing a long breath, memory returning in response to the movement of his limbs.

It had to be his life or Almerido's, and the Mexican had paid. It was a job well done; but what next?

The girl! Aye, the girl! This event added to her peril; left her position more desperate. With that body found in the alley directly under her window—as it certainly must be with the first flush of day, even if no prowling patrolman failed to stumble over it in the dark—the result would be obvious.

She must be got safely away, before the discovery was made. But how? Through what means?

He turned and stared in through the window. The light was still burning. Nothing within seemed changed. The struggle on the fire-escape had not been long or noisy, and, to all appearances, had aroused no alarm. Wherever the other members of the gang might be, they had thus far no suspicion of what had happened to their leader.

Assured as to this, Wayne thrust his head through the opening, and took a swift survey of the interior. Things were not greatly disturbed; the struggle with the girl had been too short and sharp. A chair was overturned, fragments of the broken window-pane were visible and the thick tumbler, its edges blood-stained, lay on the floor. That was all the evidence, excepting the motionless figure of the girl.

He crept across silently, and touched her; her flesh felt warm, and she shrank back from the pressure of his fingers, her head suddenly uplifting with the return of consciousness.

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At first there was no recognition in the startled eyes; she drew herself back against the wall as if in terror.

"Who are you?" she asked wildly. "How came you here?"

"Do not be afraid," Wayne begged, instantly comprehending the cause of her distress. "Let me touch you; there, feel my hand—I am very much alive, Miss Zaida."

"You—you—" she faltered, still half unbelieving. "Stuart Wayne, and alive?"

"Yes, don't stop to doubt any longer. I know all that has been told you; it is simply not true. Those fellows believed me dead and out of their way.

"I was willing they should, but—I failed to accommodate them by dying so easily. Instead, I have come back to serve you, but you must regain your own courage first. We must work together now."

"Together?"

"Yes. We are both in equal peril, and if we escape it will require all our wit and courage. I am here alone. Have you the strength to stand up?"

He helped her, and she clung to his hand as though still skeptical of his real presence, her glance wandering about the disordered room.

"Why—I remember now what happened—that brute grasped me, and I struck him. Then he threw me back against the window-frame and I fell. Where is he? What did he do after that?"

"You must have fainted," he explained swiftly. "At least you did not move until I came and aroused you. You struck Almerido a terrible blow."

"I—I killed him!"

"No; it merely stunned the fellow for a moment, and he hung there half across the sill. Listen, while I ex-

plain. I was seeking to find you, and had clambered up the fire-escape as far as this window—”

“All alone? For my sake?”

“Yes, you could never suppose I would have deserted you?”

“Oh, I hoped not—but it was only a dream; there was no reason.”

“But there was—the best reason in the world. Yet I cannot tell you now what that is. I was there, just outside that window, when they sent for you.

“It was Almerido’s plan to frighten you into signing those papers. I heard all they said. The girl who has been taking your part refused to act any longer—she was afraid—”

“The one they call Dora?”

“Yes; she accused them of murder, the killing of your grandfather, and she believed also they had taken my life. She is a thief, but this was too much for her nerve, and she refused to show herself at the bank to-morrow.

“So they had to frighten you into doing it. That was why the Mexican had you brought in here and left alone with him.”

“And you heard all that passed between us?”

“Every word.”

“I am glad. You do not doubt me any longer; you do not think now that I deliberately inveigled you into that house on Park Grove Avenue? I did not; I never knew their purpose.”

“Not for an instant did I believe ill of you,” he insisted, and his hand held her own warmly. “That was all a mistake, and need never be thought about again.

“If I had not continued to hold faith in you, I should never be here now. Believe that, and trust me. I was

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there, beyond the curtain, where I could both see and hear.

"I understood Almerido's purpose, but waited my time to act. The window stuck, and could not be raised without noise; and then the end came so suddenly I had no opportunity to intervene—"

"He leaped at me half across the room. I struck, without even knowing what I did."

"Yes, I had the fellow in my grasp almost as soon as he fell, we fought it out, there on the platform. It was nip and tuck as to which of us would take the fall, but at the last he lost. He's down there in the alley, now."

Her wide-open eyes stared in horror at the shattered window frame.

"Out there! He is there—dead!"

"Dead, no doubt, as he dropped four stories. He went over the rail, and is down there yet. We must get away from here before the body is discovered."

She clung to him, overmastered by the thought, her slender form trembling from excitement.

"He—he would have killed you unless you had killed him?"

"Undoubtedly such were his intentions. Well, there is one less beast in the world. It is not of him we must think, but of those others.

"They are still here in this house and our lives will pay forfeit if we are caught. The door is locked?"

"Yes, he—he had the key."

"And it will be in his pocket, now. To break the lock would arouse the whole place; the only means of escape left is by the ladder outside."

"Down the fire-escape? Oh, I could not with—with that dead man lying below!"

"Zaida," and he held her closely by the arms, his eyes searching her face, "you are going to trust me, are you not?"

"Yes," she said, simply.

"There is no other way possible and there is no time to lose. If it could be avoided I would not ask you to take such a risk—you believe that?"

"I believe all you tell me."

"Then listen to me, now; it is not merely because you are a woman in peril that I am here to aid you; it is because I care, sincerely care. Nothing else would have led me to this task."

"You care for me—you?"

"Is that so unbelievable? From the very first, in the park—do you remember?—you came into my life with an appeal no other woman possessed. I could not drive you from my thoughts; I tried to do so, in vain—you haunted my memory, and I had to follow.

"That is what has brought me here. I have been willing to pit my life against yours; I know now that the one means nothing without the other."

"You—you cannot realize what you say," she stammered. "Why, it is impossible for me to believe this."

"Impossible! Did you not pledge me your belief?"

"Oh, did I? Yes, I did, but I never dreamed you would say that to me. You must not; you are a great man, Stuart Wayne; the world talks about you, while I—I am nothing; not even an identity—for all you really know a mere adventuress, consorting with thieves, here in a thieves' den. You cannot love me."

"I not only can, but I do," he insisted, so earnestly as to forget the surroundings. "If I am famous it is

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as much luck as ability; others more worthy have failed. That fact has no bearing upon us.

"I know this is neither the time nor place in which to say such things, but the very peril surrounding you makes it necessary that you trust me completely. We must brave danger together to get away. I hoped my words might add to your strength and courage."

"They do," she confessed, the clasp of her fingers growing firmer, as her eyes frankly met his own. "I am not displeased, only confused. Let us not talk of this now; I cannot think clearly, for you have always seemed to me as belonging to a different world."

"Please do not say that again, now; I will do whatever you ask. Have you some plan?"

"A very simple one," he said, his voice showing disappointment. "Of course, I was a fool to say what I did, though I meant every word; it was quite right that you should rebuke me."

"But it was not rebuke. I—I am so proud to know you can feel that way; only—only I am afraid it may just be to-night, and not to-morrow. I cannot quite understand yet—tell me, please, what is to be done?"

"There seems to be left us only the one way out," he admitted, gripping himself with an effort. "And that is by the window. It means a dangerous climb down an iron ladder."

"I am not afraid. I will assume any risk to escape from here."

"Then we will make the effort together. Wait; let me go first."

He extinguished the light. There was no transom over the door, by means of which any guard in the hall

could observe this change, and their own movements would be concealed under the cloak of darkness.

She stood outlined against the window, and he found her easily, assisting her across the sill onto the narrow platform outside. For a moment they stood there, leaning over the rail, and staring down into the gloom of the alley.

Both remembered the crushed body lying on the stones below, concealed by the night, and her hand nervously gripped his sleeve.

"He fell from here? He is down there, now?" she whispered.

"Yes, but beyond any power to injure us. But what does that mean—the light? It has just been turned on."

They stared at it, the radiance streaming out suddenly from an uncurtained window just below. It was directly opposite the fire-escape, on the story beneath where they stood, and in its glare the entire platform became revealed as clear as day.

To escape observation would now be practically impossible. The two hung over the rail but could distinguish no shadow within the room.

"It was not there a minute ago," he whispered, "but it blocks our descent. No one could hope to pass that lighted window, unseen."

"Cowan's room was on that floor," she answered. "Perhaps those others are there, waiting to be called."

"No doubt they are. Almerido's plan was to take you back to the house on Park Grove before daylight, and they expect his signal. But what can we do? There is no possibility of our slipping past that light, unseen."

"You dare not attempt breaking open the door?"

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"It would be sure to give the alarm and bring them upon us, and the chances are some one has been left on guard, in the hall."

His eyes turned upward, scanning the way to the roof; a story and a half arose above them, black, forbidding, the topmost rungs of the ladder projecting against the somewhat lighter sky.

"Do you know what is up there?" he asked, pointing. "There must be a scuttle leading to the roof!"

She shook her head doubtfully.

"I was never above this floor. My room was on the other side. It opened on a narrow air-space, with a brick wall opposite."

"A brick wall?" Then the next building is as high as this?"

"I think so. I could not see to the top, for my window was nailed down."

"How wide was the air-space?"

"Not more than four or five feet."

"Then we must go that way—up instead of down. There will be openings leading to both roofs, and some opportunity for descending within.

"At least this offers us a fighting chance—the only one I can see. Will you dare attempt it?"

Her eyes followed the dim outline of the ladder clinging to the brick front. The light streaming from the open window below revealed her face indistinctly and her breath came quickly. Her eyes fell, and met his own.

"There is no other way, you say; then I can go."

"You are a brave girl."

"No, I am not; that is the real trouble. I am terribly afraid, Stuart Wayne, but I am desperate, and—and—I trust you."

CHAPTER XXIII

ON THE ROOF

Below, the fire-escape was in the form of a staircase with platforms, and a hand-rail, easy and safe to traverse; but the section above leading to the roof, consisted merely of an iron ladder spiked to the wall—safe enough perhaps, but requiring a firm grip and steady nerves to win to the top.

The slight tremor, which could not be disguised in the girl's voice, told Wayne of her distress. His hand sought hers instantly.

"You are frightened? The height makes you dizzy?"

"Terribly so," she confessed. "But I am sure I can make it all right. I must. I cannot even think of where I am. If I just keep my face to the wall, there is no real danger—is there?"

"No; the ladder is secure enough; all you need do is to hold tight, and go up step by step; the distance is not great."

"You believe in me, don't you?"

"Implicitly; you will make it if you give me your word."

She smiled bravely, her eyes frankly meeting his own.

"And I give it now," she said, resolutely. "I am going to the top, and shall not fail you. No; let me go first; it will be easier with you just below me.

"I—I wouldn't dare let go then, for—for if I did it

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would mean your death as well as my own. I—I am sure that thought will make me go on.”

“Zaida—”

“Not now; please not now. Don’t try to hold me back. See, I am not afraid any longer.”

She drew her hand from his clasp and clambered to the rail, reaching up to grasp the iron rungs of the ladder above. He could see the outline of her slender figure poised there in the dim reflection of light from below, but her face was hidden as she fronted the blank wall.

Unhesitatingly her foot felt for the support of the lower step, and she began to creep upward until her body cleared the rail, and she clung suspended against the sheer wall. Instantly he followed, staring up at the dark, creeping form above him, shapeless but visible, his heart beating like a trip-hammer as his groping hands closed on the same rung which gave support to her feet.

It was more of an effort than even he had anticipated; the climb was so straight up, and the iron rungs were so close to the wall. He felt as if he were hanging over a great abyss, where the slightest misstep, the slip of a foot, the failure of a hand-grasp, would mean instant destruction.

Height did not ordinarily affect him seriously, but now he was conscious of terror and a sense of dizziness.

The very closeness of the wall seemed to thrust him out into the void, and he could not free his mind from the vision of that crushed and mangled body below.

There was no sound other than the slight creak of the iron rods under their weight, and a faint swish of the girl’s skirts as she advanced. She said nothing; he could not even distinguish her breathing, but she kept moving

up—up, foot by foot, clinging to that smooth wall like a fly.

Once she paused, as though breathless, but only for an instant. Before he could speak she was in motion again, but more slowly now, as though the terrible strain were telling on both muscle and nerve.

The ladder ran up the bricks close to the window of the upper story. The room within was black and silent, the sash securely locked.

Wayne ventured to call to the girl to stop as he tried to force this open, but the effort was in vain, and he dared not smash the glass, as it would make too much noise.

"Are you very tired?" he asked solicitously. "There is no breaking in here; we shall have to go to the top."

"I—I can make it, I think," she said, but there was a catch in her voice, almost a sob.

"Let me work up beside you, and then you can rest leaning against me."

"Oh, no—no. If it must be done, I would rather go straight ahead. I—I am sure I can keep on; it is not far now."

"No; the hard part will be getting around the cornice. Don't look down; just hang on tight, and keep going up."

She made no answer, but slowly, determinedly resumed her climb, feeling cautiously for each upward rung of the ladder. Wayne crept after, so intent on her every movement as to be utterly forgetful of himself. The point of danger was ahead, and must be surmounted by tired muscles and a will already weakened by effort.

Could the girl make it safely, or would her strained grip relax, her mind fail in the terrible emergency? It

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seemed to him that his heart ceased to beat as he watched her creep steadily upward.

The ornamental cornice overhung the edge of the roof, compelling the iron ladder to curve outward before surmounting the top.

Rounding that loop was to be the final test, for at this point the body must swing downward, held by sheer strength alone, suspended above the black void below, as the climber groped almost blindly for the bars above.

Zaida never hesitated, but as her form curved outward above him, Wayne lost courage, and hid his face against the brick wall. He could not look, dare not watch her struggle, expecting each instant to hear her cry of despair, or be struck by her falling body.

There was nothing he could do or say, there was no stopping her now. He could only cling desperately and pray that she might have strength to conquer.

He heard nothing but the slight sound of her advance; a bit of plaster dislodged from between the bricks struck him and fell into the night below; he was conscious of the aching of his own arms, and that he had bitten his lip until the blood ran. Yet he could not move, dared not glance upward.

Suddenly the faint creaking of the ladder ceased. Good Heaven! had her effort ended? Was she hanging there over that awful depth, her grip loosening for the fall?

In a dread that half-crazed him he looked up. The ladder above was empty; he could trace its spidery outline to the very top, against the background of the sky—it was empty!

She had not failed! No, that could not have happened without his knowledge. There had been no cry,

no down-rush of a falling body, no crunch on those cruel stones beneath. But one other conclusion was possible—the girl had surmounted the turn, and attained the roof; her nerve and strength had held out; she had made the dangerous curve in safety!

His own courage came back instantly, his mind clearing, his will resuming command.

His fear had been entirely for her, and now he went forward with perfect confidence, swinging recklessly out with the curve of the ladder, careless of that yawning depth beneath, feet and hands gripping the iron rungs, in his haste to attain the top.

He came to the summit of the brick wall, and gazed over at the slightly sloping roof a few feet below.

There was light enough from the stars to render objects close at hand visible. She lay there just as she had fallen, exhausted, her nerve utterly gone, yet alive; with one leap he was beside her on his knees.

"Bravo!" he cried, unable to restrain himself. "You made it; you had the strength, the courage! I dared not even watch you."

She smiled into his face, and her hands touched him, but it was with an effort that her lips found words.

"I—I have no strength left," she panted faintly. "I—I cannot tell now how it was done. Oh! I was so afraid; that memory will haunt me as long as I live. I—I must be an awful coward."

"You! You are the bravest girl I ever knew. That was a terrible test; I had no conception of what was before us when we started the climb. But it is all over with now. Perhaps you had better rest here while I explore the roof; you will be all right again in a few minutes."

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"I would rather go with you, if you don't mind. My strength will return quicker if I use it. You do not mind?"

"Certainly not; yet perhaps it will be as well if we both rest a moment first. The roof seems clear."

Her eyes were keen even in the midst of that darkness, and seemed to recognize the shapeless outlines about them.

"There is a wash-bench over there, and a tub," she said, pointing, "and that must be a clothes-line between those posts. The roof-scuttle is yonder; closed, of course. What can we do if it is locked?"

"Try the next roof; anyhow, let us not worry until it is certain that we need to."

She turned toward him, her face uplifted in the dim star-light, her beauty only more manifest by the soft radiance of the night."

"Why should you do all this for me?" she questioned impetuously. "You have exposed yourself to deadly peril. Those men will hesitate at nothing; already they have attempted your life. Why, you do not even know who I am!"

"Nor, in truth, would it make any difference," he answered. "You are yourself, and that is enough. I have lived long enough in this world to laugh at birth and position in my choice of friends.

"I came to Chicago poor and unknown, and I have found loyalty in all classes. Yet I do know what you are, and who you are. How could your nature be tested any more thoroughly than by what we have passed through together?"

"If we had been meeting daily for years in ordinary

life, we should not really know each other as we do now. Do you not feel that you actually know me?"

"Yes," she admitted. "you have, of course, proved yourself. I—I am very grateful."

"I have no special fondness for that word; it is cold."

"Not in the sense I use it; why should you say that?"

"Because I come to you in a vastly different mood. My heart spoke in that room below."

"Yet I could not answer you then, or now," she interrupted. "Please do not blame me, but think of my position. I do care for you, Stuart Wayne; I care deeply, but I have the pride of a woman."

"You do not even know that my story is true; that I am the granddaughter of Patrick Cullom. You have accepted me on faith."

"Yet that is easily proved, once you are safely out of the clutches of these villains."

"I am not so sure that it is. No one knows me; I have no papers."

"But those others had, and they are now in the possession of the court. All that remains is to establish your identity."

"How is that to be done? The girl, Dora, has impersonated me. I have met no one since I was brought to the city. Almerido took no chances of failure."

"Yet, he has failed. We shall find some means by which to clear the mystery. I will go on the stand and testify."

"To what? That I associated with thieves, and appealed to you for help. You have nothing but my word—nothing."

"Oh, yes, I have; not that that would not be enough

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to satisfy me, but I possess other evidence. I have heard those people talk, discuss their plans. I know the entire story, and I believe the girl, Dora, will yet make a full confession of her part in the plot."

"Have you met her?"

"Yes; she is not altogether a bad sort; only brought up wrong, associating all her life with thieves. She even believes I am one, and if I can keep up that character, she may talk with me freely."

"I do not understand. She thinks you a thief?"

"Yes, a most distinguished member of the profession—Mr. Billy Burke, of Cleveland and New York. You, of course, have never even heard of the gentleman, but he is a dip of wide reputation, and, having just pulled off a good thing, is now hiding here in Chicago, from the police.

"I read the story in the evening papers, and decided to play it up strong in order to get here. This place is operated by a fence named Hooligan. He has a saloon down below, and keeps these upper rooms as a hide-out for thieves. It's known as a hotel, and is under police protection, the proprietor having a political pull."

"But who is Dora?"

"Hooligan's daughter. I blew in here last evening as Billy Burke. A tough guy called Spike Murphy took me to Hooligan, and while we were talking Dora came in.

"She isn't a bad-looking girl of her peculiar type, and flirting is part of her game. I rather think she was interested in me and could be induced to talk freely if I only had her alone."

"But how could you? You mean come back, and see her?"

"I hardly know; indeed I haven't given the matter

any thought, for it just now occurred to me as feasible. A confession from her would be all we would need.

"How to get it is the problem. I don't think the girl is yellow, and she has been brought up to hate the law, but she might tell her story freely to a friend. That would be a dirty piece of business, though."

She stood up, as though Wayne's words had stung.

"Does she deserve consideration? The girl has deliberately helped to rob me. Do you forget that?"

"No; it is because I remember that I am willing to play the part."

"But you like her?"

"In a way, yes. I find her interesting, and, from her standpoint, honest. She has already rebelled against this bunch, but will never go back on a pal.

"But, Zaida, don't misunderstand my interest in the woman—it is in her type rather than herself. I would study her as any other phenomenon."

"But you said that she was pretty."

He laughed.

"Men say that only when they do not care deeply; when it is only a surface feeling. She is pretty, but not in a way to mean anything—just pretty, that's all.

"But let's not talk of this any longer. We have a hard journey to make, and you are strong enough, now."

"Yes; what shall we attempt first?"

"The scuttle, of course; if that is unfastened and the stairs deserted, our escape will be simple enough."

Wayne found the cover securely fastened from below and fitting so closely as to prevent any purchase from such improvised levers as could be discovered on the roof. He wrenched a leg from the wash-bench, only to find it useless for the purpose.

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The covering was of iron, operating on hinges, and not to be dislodged by any force he could apply from above.

Satisfied as to this fact, he stepped across to the opposite side of the roof to gain a view of the building to the south. Its roof was a story lower and there was an air-shaft between, five or six feet wide, to cross only to find it useless for the purpose.

Indeed, at first glance, peering down into that dark pit, the difficulty appeared insurmountable. Wayne clambered to the top of the wall, and leaned as far over as he dared, measuring the distance with his eyes.

His thought was, that, bearing an end of the rope with him, he might leap the opening, leaving his companion to descend later by means of the line, which he could hold firm from below. It was a desperate chance, yet nothing better occurred to him.

But, as he leaned out, staring down in uncertainty, the gloom deceiving his vision, he became aware of a movement just below where he clung. At first he was unable to discern its nature; then his strained eyes, accustomed themselves to the gloom, vaguely made out the object.

Just beneath a window-curtain, fanned by a draft of air, was flapping noisily. It could mean only one thing—an unlocked, partially opened window, unlighted, and not ten feet away. This was better than a blind leap into the dark; a knotted rope would make descent possible.

CHAPTER XXIV

WITH DORA HOOLIGAN

He scrambled down, explaining his discovery to Zaida.

"That must be my room," she said. "The upper half of my window was lowered; but how can we get down to it?"

"That should not be hard, but will require some nerve. I know you possess that. I'll knot this rope; it is strong enough, and then go down first.

"Once inside, I can fasten the lower end, firmly, and you need have nothing to fear. Are you willing to try?"

"Yes," she answered unhesitatingly. "I suppose I must do it; I—I cannot stay here; but you must be there to help me."

"Of course, now assist me with the line; no, we'll cut it, that will save considerable time."

It was the work of moments, Wayne swiftly knotting the strong cord every few feet, and securing one end safely to a strong post. Again resuming his position on top of the wall, and marking the window below him by the flapping curtain, he lowered the rope until it hung well down into the black void of the air-shaft.

Assured that it must extend well below the window, he helped her to clamber up beside him, whispered a few words of instruction and courage into her ear, and then cautiously lowered himself over the wall and began the descent.

Except for the swinging of the loose end of the rope

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the task was not particularly difficult, as he clung close to the brick wall and the knots gave grip to both hands and feet. It was the uncertainty of what might be encountered below which caused his heart to beat swiftly.

He was going steadily down into a black well of impenetrable darkness and silence, except for the flapping of that guiding curtain. Above he could perceive the dim outline of the girl, leaning cautiously over the edge, but below all was black and unknown. He proceeded slowly, confident of the strength of the rope, but unable to accurately gage the distance.

It seemed a long way before his groping fingers touched the upper frame of the window, and the darkness was so dense down there that he had to feel about carefully before he found safe foot-hold on the upper edge of the lower sash.

With one hand he succeeded in running the curtain up, enabling him to peer into the room. It was a black void, noiseless and apparently deserted; his eyes were unable to distinguish a single object, nor could his ears detect a sound. Still clinging to the rope with one hand, with the other he pushed down the upper sash sufficiently to admit his body, and climbed through, leaving the cord dangling. For an instant, he rested there in the silence, undecided, his feet on the inner sill, staring blindly into the darkness.

Should he risk a light? Should he seek to explore this interior? Somehow the intense stillness and gloom sapped his courage; he wanted her with him; he could not tear his thoughts from the girl above, leaning over and staring down into the depths where he had vanished. The desire obsessed him, and he leaned out again into the air-shaft, shaking the rope as a signal.

"It is all right, Zaida," he whispered. "The window is open, and no one here. Come down carefully; I'll help you get your footing."

There was no reply, but, bending out and gazing upward, he could perceive the dim, formless outline of the girl as she lowered herself from the summit of the wall, and he felt the vibration of the taut rope under her weight.

The strain of her slow descent was upon him as well as her, and no small measure of relief came to them both, as he guided the slender foot to the safe support of the lowered sash. An instant later she was securely within his arms, and deposited on the floor of the room, where she remained motionless, breathing heavily.

"The worst is over now," he murmured. "Was this your room?"

"Yes; I can see nothing, yet I am sure it must be; there is an electric light above the stand—shall I turn it on?"

"Perhaps it will be safer not to do so; unless there is something here you wish to take with you."

"No, there is nothing; you mean for us to slip down the stairs and escape?"

"Of course; it is so late the halls must be deserted; only the front entrance is boarded up, and the only way out is through the saloon; that is the only place where I anticipate trouble."

"But why there at this hour? What time is it?"

"Nearly three; without doubt it is an all-night dive, and may be far livelier now than when I came in last evening. Are you ready to try our luck?"

Her hands touched his sleeve impulsively.

"Yes, but, strangely enough, I am more frightened

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at this attempt than all that has gone before. If we should encounter those men it—it would cost you your life. They might spare me, but you would never get away alive.”

“Don’t worry about that; they would think I was a ghost, come to haunt them. Cowan would be so frightened at sight of me he’d fall down-stairs.”

“Please do not laugh. I—I have almost lost my nerve. Oh, of course, I am going on, but this—this is a terrible strain on me; your danger.”

“Mine?”

“Yes; you have said you loved me, and I have not been very gracious. But I am going to be honest now. I do sincerely care for you. You must know this without my confession?”

He drew her close in the darkness.

“I hope I did,” he said gravely. “This is a strange time and place to speak of love, but it has all been strange with us from the very beginning. Perhaps the very mystery has had its attractions; but be that as it may, the time has come when it is Zaida Grayson alone. There no longer remains any doubt—I love you, dear.”

“And I give you my heart,” she answered softly. “Do with me as you will.”

“Then I must choose first escape; there is no happiness, no hope possible until we are safely beyond the clutches of these men. Every moment of delay increases the danger of discovery. Where is the door?”

She felt her way through the darkness, one hand yet clasping his in guidance. Together they rested finally on the latch.

“Kiss me before we go into the unknown,” he whispered. “It will be your pledge for to-morrow.”

"For to-morrow?"

"Yes; I must have the right to stand between you and all this—your battle is to be my battle."

"And you accept me on faith?"

"Absolutely; I ask only your word."

Their lips met and clung, his arms about her, her hands clasping him. The very darkness seemed to draw them closer, to hold them in a world of their own, the silence making manifest their heart-throbs.

"You have not said the words I wish most to hear?"

"What words, Stuart?"

"Can you not guess?"

"Yes, and I can say them gladly—I love you!"

"Then, whatever happens, trust me. There may be battle before we win free of this house. I am ready to fight with any weapon which may come to my hand, in order to save you. We cannot linger here longer, but must face whatever awaits us below."

The door opened noiselessly upon a deserted, unlighted hallway. That is, no gleam was visible on the upper floor, although an electric was burning somewhere below, the dim radiance stealing up the stairway with sufficient brightness to render the way visible. The two stole out, closing the door silently behind them, and crept cautiously forward to the head of the stairs.

If any of the rooms were occupied no evidence proclaimed the fact; there was no gleam of light from under any closed door, and no sound came from any sleeper within. The silence was profound, and they advanced with such caution that only once did a loosened board creak slightly under Wayne's tread.

Leaning over the stair-rail the hallway below was plainly visible—the exact replica of the one already

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traversed, except for its being brightly lighted. There was no furniture, the plastered walls bare, and not overly clean, a narrow matting of straw partially concealing the floor, and a tattered strip of rag carpet protecting the stairs.

It was gloomy and forlorn enough, the doors opening on either side, painted yellow, each bearing a black stenciled number on its upper panel. None of these stood open, nor were there any transoms, but as the two fugitives crept like ghosts down the steps the girl's watchful eyes detected light at the threshold of one directly opposite the landing.

She grasped Wayne's arm, and pointed, without venturing to speak.

Signaling her to remain where she was, he stole forward along the wall, until he stood before the door. There he paused, holding his breath as he listened. The only sound from within was that of heavy breathing, and he bent lower, his eye seeking a glimpse through the open keyhole.

An instant later he stole as silently back, and joined Zaida, leading her into the shadows underneath the stairs.

"They are both in there," he whispered, "and asleep."

"The men you mean? Cowan and Groggin?"

"Yes. Evidently they tried to sit up, waiting to hear from Almerido; but drank too much. I saw a whisky bottle on the table about one-third full, and a broken glass on the floor. Cowan lay across the bed, with his clothes on, and Groggin had his head on the table."

"No one else in the room?"

"Not that I could see; I only had a glimpse of the center and one side. You're thinking of the women?"

"The Brennon woman particularly—she's the dangerous one, the brains of the whole gang. She and Dora Hooligan will not be together—they hate each other.

"The one I am afraid of is Nell Brennon; she is a devil and will be neither drunk nor asleep. Let's not wait here, if the way is clear."

The stairs leading down to the lower floors were considerably wider than those above, but on the next landing they could hear noise from below, the sound of voices, the tinkle of glasses, a shuffling of feet, and an occasional burst of laughter. Late as the hour was the Hooligan saloon was in full blast; the front door closed, no doubt, in strict observance of the ordinance, but the side entrance unlocked, in accordance with political pull, and a police force which dared not interfere.

Wayne endeavored to recall the situation, to figure out some method of escape unobserved. He had been originally admitted through that side-door, and remembered that it was guarded. Spike Murphy had been compelled to vouch for him. Yet, there were only the two passages leading to the street—down this private hall, or directly through the saloon.

There was little choice; in either case it meant running a gauntlet. As he hesitated which course to select, the decision was made for him. Into the bright glare of the hall below came Dora Hooligan, humming a dance tune, and glancing back over her shoulder to send a parting word to some one out of sight behind her.

"Oh, I'll be right back, Harry, after I find out what is going on up-stairs; that jazz band is good for an hour yet."

Decision came to Wayne in a flash. There was no opportunity to hide; the hall was bare, and so far as

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he knew every door was locked. Once she caught sight of the girl the game was up, and the only hope lay in halting her below the second story.

With one hand he forced his startled companion down behind the rail, his lips muttering a swift message.

"Keep still, right where you are; let me talk with him whatever happens don't move!"

Outwardly careless, with hat cocked on one ear, unlighted cigar between his lips he strolled about rail-head, taking a step or two downward, seemingly conscious of the approaching figure below. Then he paused in sudden recognition.

"Ah, fortune favors me," he exclaimed cheerfully. "The music made me think of you, and led me to this chance."

"A chance at what, Mr. Burke?"

"At finding you up at this hour, of course."

"Oh, I am quite a night bird; I have to be, for fat has to have his sleep lately, and some one must wait things."

He came slowly down beside her, and leaned against the side-rail.

"Who is Harry?" he asked soberly.

Dora laughed, flashing her eyes up into his, instantly divining his meaning.

"Oh, he's one of the bar-men; a rather nice-looking fellow, and I promised him a dance."

"And will you promise me one?"

She laughed.

"Of course; could I refuse after you had confessed getting up at this hour in the morning merely in a hope of meeting me? But you only said that to flatter me."

"No, but I did not," earnestly. "I was interest-

Howland told me about you. Bob liked you awfully well."

"He said he did; but he skipped out just the same."

"That wasn't his fault, he had to; they had him right here; but you ought to have heard him blow about you to me. I half thought he was crazy until last evening."

"Until last evening, Mr. Burke?"

"Yes, until I met you. Since then, I am in his class. I ain't often afraid of a skirt," he continued audaciously, "but I'd have kissed you up-stairs, if I'd dared—that's straight, Dora."

"Well, you better not get too free, Billy Burke. I know your style, and just because I'm nice to you doesn't mean you can come on from New York and make a fool out of me. Chicago is no yap town."

"It is nothing to get mad about," he said easily, in no way abashed. "I haven't talked like that to a girl in five years. The honest fact is, I like your style, so why shouldn't I want to kiss you?"

"What you want and what I want are two different things, that's all. Because I agreed to give you a dance, doesn't mean I'm in love, does it? Do you want that dance now?"

"No, I'd rather stay here and talk. I like to be alone with you."

"Is that so? Got something private to say?"

"Well, maybe I have. You're my kind of a girl. I knew that the minute I saw you. But I didn't exactly come down here to make love to you, at that."

"I got it into my head you was in some sort o' trouble, and I thought maybe I might help you out."

"Trouble?" her eyes questioning. "What do you mean?"

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"Well," he explained. "You see it was this way. After you left me in that room I turned out the light and laid down. I was dog-tired, but I couldn't sleep.

"Pretty soon I heard voices; first I couldn't locate them, but finally I went over to the window, and discovered the parties were talking in the room above me, an' both windows open—"

"Oh! And you heard what was said?"

"More or less of it; they seemed to be mad, an' was speaking pretty loud. I wouldn't have paid no attention, but I heard your voice, an' what you said sorter stirred me up—it seemed to me the devil was to pay."

Her hands were clasping the stair-rail nervously, her eyes searching his face. She was no longer flippant or coquettish.

"What—what did you hear me say?" she questioned anxiously.

"Well," he explained, speaking slowly, "there were two or three men there—one had a gruff voice, an' another talked like a foreign guy. I couldn't just make out their game, but it had to do with some dame they was skinning out of an inheritance.

"What interested me was that you had got mixed up in the play someway, and wanted to get out. That's true, isn't it?"

"Yes," hesitatingly, but unable in her surprise to deny this fact. "I did want to get out."

"That's how I took it," more confidently. "Those guys had murdered somebody, and you didn't want any o' that in yours."

CHAPTER XXV

DORA TELLS HER STORY

She stared at him in silence, the spots of rouge showing conspicuously on her white cheeks, and her eyes confessing fright. Her lips trembled, but emitted no sound, and Wayne took one of her hands from the rail and held it closely within his own.

"Now see here, little girl," he said soothingly, "you don't need to get scared at me. I'm no stickler about such things, although I ain't never taken up murder as a side-line.

"What I'm saying to you is said as a friend. I like you, or else I wouldn't be mixing myself up in this affair. I've got trouble enough of my own, but if I can help you out, I'm glad of the chance—that's all.

"I just took a notion that maybe you had confidence enough in me to tell the story. I reckon you never heard o' Billy Burke going back on a pal, did you?"

"No," she admitted, "they say you're straight."

"Then why not tell me about it?" he urged. "I won't think none the less of you because you fell into a bad mess. We all of us get in wrong now an' then.

"It sure made me mad to hear that foreign guy talk to you the way he did. I'd like to punch his nose for him, and I made up my mind, then, that you and I'd have a good stiff talk together. Well, there ain't no better time than now. Come on, sit down here on this step an' tell me what it is you're up against."

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She let him place her beside him on the stair, but sat there silent, her eyes on the bare wall before her. Wayne, glancing at the averted face, realized that he had not yet won.

"You don't trust me, Dora?"

"Oh, yes, I do—in a way. I know you're straight, and all that; but—but I have always been taught to keep my mouth shut; even you would despise me if I blowed."

"Not in a case like this where you've been double-crossed. I ain't asking you to spill any thing to the police. All I'm asking is an excuse to go up an' kick that foreign guy out of the house."

"But why should you care?"

"Because you are the nicest girl I've seen in a coon's age," he argued, again gripping her hand, "and I don't want you to get in bad with this gang."

Her eyes met his with a new expression in their depths.

"Do you really mean that, Billy?"

"I sure do. I want to get this thing straight."

"Well, I'll tell you part of it, anyhow," she said impulsively, "for I don't want you to think I'm that sort of a girl. Of course, I don't pretend to be no angel, but I got into this thing without knowing just what the game was till it was too late.

"I never was brought up to be very particular. I was born back of a saloon, an' played with a hard lot ever since I was a kid—you know what I mean?"

"Sure; you never had a fair chance; you ain't the only one."

"But at that I ain't so bad," she insisted. "Naturally, I'm not friendly with the police, any more than you are. I'm Hooligan's daughter, and was born the

wrong side of the fence; but that don't mean that I want to be hooked up in any murder trial."

"I should say not. Who is this guy that was going to raise trouble for you?"

"A Mexican, Juan Almerido; he used to be one of Villa's officers, and once, when they sacked a town down there, an American engineer was killed. Before he died he told Almerido something about an inheritance due his daughter up here in Chi, and gave him some papers to take care of.

"That's what started the affair. It looked good to the Mexican, and he worked out a scheme to get the money for himself."

"How did he plan it?"

"Well, first he thought he could terrorize the daughter, and make her play the game for him. But she wasn't that kind, and so he had to keep her out of sight, and find somebody else to play the part. That's where I came in."

"How did the fellow stumble onto you?"

"Through a guy named Hartigan down at El Paso. He was in the room up there to-night, and goes around now under the name of Cowan. His dad and mine used to be friends a long while ago—old Hartigan ran race-horses and a gambling joint, but the boy never amounted to much.

"He had a saloon here in town, once, but got into trouble, and had to skip out. That's why he changed his name. He's a big, burly brute, but when he drifted back to Chi, linked up with the Mexican in this deal, he hunted up our joint, because he knew my father."

"I see; and that is where you came in?"

"Yes, I looked enough like the girl to pass, as nobody

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up here had seen her since she was a kid. It was a cinch the way they told it—like taking candy from a baby.

"All I had to do was stall around, wear nice clothes, and draw in a slice of real money. You don't blame me, do you, for copping onto a chance like that?"

He laughed, suddenly recalled to the character he was playing.

"Blame you? Why, I'd eat up such a chance. Who was it you were supposed to impersonate?"

"Im—what? Oh, yes—her, you mean. Miss Zaida Grayson; isn't that a name for your life? It seems she was the granddaughter of a rich old bloke on the North Side, in the iron-foundry business—oodles of money, and no other heir.

"The mother ran away and got married; there was a row and all that sort of thing. Well, I had to be the long-lost child. It worked beautifully too, only the housekeeper got on my nerves.

"The old man was all right; I sort of liked him—Patrick Lloyd Cullom: 'Pig-Iron' Cullom; ever hear the name?"

Wayne shook his head doubtfully.

"Hardly. I'm from New York, you know. What soured you on the gang?"

"Well, first, I didn't like any of 'em," she admitted hotly, "and then they didn't play the game square. Almerido wanted to cop the whole thing at once, and get out.

"I got it into my nut that they were afraid I'd make a bull, and were laying for a chance to double-cross me. Then Cowan got gay, and I told that Brennon woman he's living with where she could get off at.

"Still I guess I'd 'a' hung to the job if the fools

hadn't attempted to hurry up matters by putting a dirk into Cullom. That was more than I could stand for."

"You mean they actually killed him?"

"Sure; had everything cinched and then pulled off that stunt. Did you ever hear of such a fool play? It worked, too; they actually got away with it.

"Cullom's buried, and the coroner never tumbled to the fact that he was croaked. The Mexican never dreamed that I knew the truth, until to-night. But it made me sore to be in with such a gang, particularly after they slugged that fellow Wayne—wholesale murder ain't my style."

There was a moment's silence, the red burning in the girl's cheeks, the man wondering how much farther he might venture. A slight noise above startled her to glance about quickly.

"What was that?"

"I heard nothing; it might have been a mouse."

She shrugged her shoulders, with an uneasy laugh.

"I'm as nervous as an old maid since I got on to these guys," she explained petulantly. "I've got into this scrape, and don't know how to get out. What do you think about it, Billy?"

"Just as you do," he answered promptly. "They mean to double-cross you, and I'd quit 'em cold. You ain't done nothing yet that the police can get the hooks into you for—at least," thoughtfully, "they'd be mighty glad to give you a clean bill if you'd tell your story."

"Peach, you mean? But I couldn't do that."

"Well, I don't see why not, Dora. I'm a crook, an' I aim to play fair, but I'll never climb a scaffold to save a bunch like that from getting what's due 'em. Who's this other guy? And what happened to him?"

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"Who—Wayne? I never saw that buck; he was a writer of some kind, who picked up a note that the Grayson girl dropped on the street one day. The guy followed it up and managed in some way to get an interview with her.

"There was a fight, but he got away. The fellow must have got sweet on the lady, for he stuck to the trail like a bloodhound until the gang got frightened. Then they did him up."

"How?"

"Oh, the bruisers got after him one night, hurt him bad, and shipped him out of town in a freight-car. He was found dead, the next day, three hundred miles west."

"Who did that job?"

"I guess all three had a hand in it, but Cowan did the slugging."

"And who killed Cullom?"

Her eyes sought his, a glint of sudden suspicion in their depths.

"Now see here, Billy Burke, what are you questioning me like this for?" I suppose I'm easy, but I'd to know what all this is to you?"

"It's nothing, only I want to help you out," he protested warmly. "You're a nice girl, Dora, and I don't want to see you get in bad. Come on now, you've told me so much you might just as well finish up. Do you know how Cullom was killed, and who croaked him?"

"But I don't know you; I never saw you till to-night."

"But you know I'm Bob Howland's pal, and he never trained with any lame duck. If he was here you'd tell him, wouldn't you? Then what's the matter with me? I thought we were hitting it off pretty well together."

"Oh, I like you all right, Billy," she admitted, "but

if I was to blow the way you said it would get this place in bad. Dad isn't any too strong with the new inspector. I've told too blamed much now."

"Well, if I was aiming to throw you," Wayne urged, "I'd have just as good a chance to make the ditch with what you've already said. Only now I can't do you any good, while if I knew it all maybe I'd find the right way out. What's the matter with you going back to New York when I do?"

"You're stringing me."

"No, I'm not. That's a good way to ditch this gang; you'd sure like the old town, and I could show you some high life down there. Yes, and some easy picking, too. Let's call it a bargain, Dora, girl, what do you say?"

He held her hands, his body pressed closely against her, as she lifted her face, half convinced.

"You say that like you almost meant it."

"I do mean it. They won't keep me long in this burg; and I said to myself, the first time I seen you: 'There's a real girl, who is going back East with me, if she'll say yes.' Some fine little old team, eh?"

She laughed, her eyes sparkling.

"Sounds good, Billy, and I don't care if I do; I'm sure enough tired of this town, and the gang I'm training with."

"Then shake them for good and all," he ventured. "Give them the hook, and have it done with. Tell me the whole story first."

She sat nursing her knee, with her eyes downcast, while he waited anxiously, afraid to urge the confession further.

"I don't suppose you'd care to be tied up with me," she said finally, casting a side glance at his face, "if you

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thought I was liable to be stuck for a job like that. Well, I ain't.

"I'll tell you just how it happened. I was playing the part of the Grayson girl, and, of course, the old man thought I was the real thing. He wanted me with him all the time, and made me promise to drop in and see his office.

"I was to come down and have lunch with him, and then he meant to show me around the shops. He was awfully proud of his business.

"Well, the day all this happened I drifted in just after noon, and there wasn't a clerk in the office; they'd gone out to eat, I suppose. I caught sight of a door marked 'private,' and started to open it, when I stopped suddenly, staring at what I saw inside.

"Say, I never was so scared before in my life, and it all happened so quick I never even screamed. The old man sat at his desk, bending over, the side of his head toward an open window.

"All I saw was a hand shoved in through the opening, holding something like a knitting needle. The sharp end of this went into Cullom's head just behind the ear, and he never made a sound—just crumpled up on the desk. There wasn't no struggle, no blood—nothing but just that."

"And you never cried out?"

"No, I couldn't. At first I was simply paralyzed; then I was afraid. That fellow slipped through the window, and I saw him; that was what shut me up.

"Then the fire-alarm sounded, and people began to run through the hall outside. Nobody came into the office, but I could hear them shout to each other and rush past.

"The man inside must have known exactly what would happen, for he never lost a minute. That was what sort of paralyzed me, I guess; the way he went at it. He grabbed poor old Cullom up, ran across the office with him, out onto a little platform, where a flight of stairs led to the basement, and dropped the body over.

"I—I heard the crunch when it struck, but could do nothing but crouch there in horror. Say, I'm no chicken, but that was too much for me!"

"But what became of the murderer?"

"He leaned over the rail a second; then ran back, and crept out of the window."

"He made no attempt to rifle the body, or the desk?"

"No; he never touched a thing; that wasn't his game."

"Not his game! You knew him then?"

"Of course I did; that's what held me still; that's why I turned and ran, with no other thought but to get away unseen. My! I was scared stiff; I haven't got over it yet. It was that greasy Mexican!"

"Almerido?"

"Yes; and I was fool enough to blurt it out to-night. He'll never stop, now, until he puts the silencer on me, too. That's the fix I'm in right now. I want to go with you to New York.

"I hate that yellow beast, and I'm afraid of him. I never was scared of a man before in my life, but I am of that devil; he's as poisonous as a rattlesnake. Please, Billy, please take me out of here."

She broke down completely, and Wayne, a sudden wave of pity overcoming him, rested his hand on her shoulder.

"That's all right, little girl," he said soothingly. "We'll attend to his case; don't worry—you'll come out

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all right. Hello! what does that fellow want!"

He stood in an opened door below, a barkeeper, evidently, from his white jacket and apron, and was excitedly endeavoring to attract her attention.

Suddenly she lifted her head in startled wonder.

"What's up, Harry?"

"Maloney's just dropped in, miss—"

"The patrolman?"

"Yes; he's stumbled over a dead body in the alley; nobody he ever saw, he says, but the guy must have dropped from one of our windows."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DARK OF THE ANNEX

Dora was on her feet, dazed, but equal to the emergency.

"From above here! Is Murphy with you?"

"Yes, miss."

"Then the two of you go out and see who it is. I'll watch the bar till you get back. What about you, Mr. Burke?"

"Maybe I better wait here," Wayne answered, eager for a chance to get away. "And not give the harness-bull a glimpse of me."

"Perhaps you had."

She stopped in the doorway, and glanced back toward him.

"Say, Billy, if this guy has dropped from one of our windows, some fly-cops are liable to take a peek upstairs. Maloney is telephoning the central office now.

"The best thing for you to do will be to sneak through that side door, and beat it before they get the tip. Go to Gannon's on West Madison; tell Joe I sent you, and I'll call you up in an hour. Beat it, now."

The door closed behind her. Wayne realized the full meaning of this discovery, and the necessity for swift action. The body over which Maloney had stumbled in the darkness was, undoubtedly, that of the dead Mexican, and the slightest investigation would convince the de-

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tectives from central station that the man had not been the victim of accident.

The wide platform of the fire-escape outside his window, protected by its iron railing, would have refuted any suggestion that the fellow might have toppled over the sill.

Only deliberate suicide or the act of some other person could account for such a plunge, and the fact was bound to become known that Almerido, when last seen alive, was alone in the room with Zaida Grayson. She would be the one sought to clear up the mystery, and she must be safely out of the way before the police investigation could begin.

With this purpose dominating his mind, the young man only waited the closing of the door to leap up the stairway. To his amazement the hall above was empty, deserted. Under the glow of the single electric bulb, he could see from end to end, but could perceive no occupant. He had left her crouching here beside the rail, when he descended to interrupt Dora Hooligan, but the girl was there no longer.

What could be the cause of her disappearance? Surely she had not been discovered, and attacked, for there could have occurred no struggle unheard below. Where Wayne and Dora had been seated together on the stairs was scarcely a dozen feet below. Even the slightest sound would have reached their ears in the silence. To be sure, there had been a slight noise, which had attracted his attention, but he had laughed it off as the antics of a mouse.

What, then, had happened? Could Zaida have become angered by his apparent interest in Dora? This was unthinkable under the circumstances, for she compre-

hended his purpose in advance. He had explained to her the possibility of just such an encounter, and besides, she had been near enough to overhear every word he had said, and would understand the object in view—could not misconstrue it.

He stared about in decided perplexity, realizing that each moment of delay added to their peril. Where would Zaida have gone? What was the explanation of her sudden vanishing?

There was no means by which she could have got down the stairs unobserved, and there was no other stairway. Surely the girl would never have retraced her steps to the floor above.

Something must have occurred to frighten her, causing her to seek refuge in one of the near-by rooms. Possibly the room she had chosen was occupied and she had been prevented from returning to the hall. Yes, that must be the explanation. In seeking safety, she had fallen again into evil hands. His eyes searched the line of doors on either side the hallway. All were tightly closed except two: one standing wide open, the other slightly ajar; both interiors dark. He advanced toward the first of these, not with any expectation of finding there what he sought, but rather because he must make some move, and glanced within.

The faint gleam of a street light through the window showed the apartment to be unfurnished and untenanted. The second room was considerably larger, apparently used as a parlor, but contained no occupants. Wayne crossed it hastily, flung up the window and gazed down into the street below.

A man bearing a lantern stood at the corner of the alley, and he could hear a voice shouting some indistin-

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guishable words. Then a little group, with a burden slung between them, emerged from the dark shadows into the glow of the street lamp, heading toward the saloon entrance.

Without doubt the fellows were carrying the dead body of the Mexican. The delay had been fatal to Wayne's purpose. Already the path of escape was blocked; within another five minutes some of these men would be swarming up-stairs, seeking to learn how Almerido had met his fate.

Wayne had no thought of himself at that moment—only of Zaida. He had nothing to fear from the coming of the police; even if placed under arrest the chief would remember who he was and understand his purpose in being in the house.

He could even justify his killing of the Mexican. But what might happen to Zaida Grayson in the meantime? As a prisoner of the police, he would be helpless to serve her, and he had no doubt, now, that she was again in the power of the gang.

Would they hesitate at any crime in order to escape? They were already guilty of murder, and their only chance to dodge the penalty of the law lay in putting this helpless girl out of the way. Her peril obscured everything else.

But how could he best serve her? He ran back into the hall, endeavoring vainly to open some of the closed doors. He heard excited voices below, and realized that if he was to escape being seen he must retreat at once to the floor above.

He was at the stair-rail staring down, still uncertain as to his best course, when Dora ran swiftly up the steps,

and came face to face with him before he could disappear.

"Good Heavens! Are you here yet?" she sobbed breathlessly. "Why I told you to skip out.

"It's Almerido who is dead, and that whole bunch are coming up. What shall I do?"

"Do! there is only one thing you can do—give them a free hand."

"But you, Billy! Some of those fly-cops will know you. You've got to get out of here and the others must be warned."

"What others?"

"Cowan and his gang. You don't think I want to be dragged into this affair, do you?"

"That's why I ran up here as soon as I saw that dead Mexican. They'll find papers on him, giving the whole gang away. Come on with me quick; we've only got a minute; they're searching his pockets now."

She gripped his hand, and, almost before Wayne could comprehend her purpose, he was dragged up the next flight of stairs to the semidarkness of the third floor. The girl left him there, running hastily down the corridor to a door, on the panels of which she rapped smartly.

There was no response and she grasped the knob, flinging the door wide open. The room was dark, deserted. In another instant she was back beside him, casting a frightened glance down the stairs.

"They have not started up yet! I don't know what to do! Nobody there? They must have got the alarm and taken to the hole. I pressed the buzzer down-stairs, but was afraid it might not work."

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"There is a secret passage, then?"

"Yes, of course."

"Did Cowan know it?"

"Nell Brennon did; she hid here once before. That's Maloney's voice; they're coming. Worse luck, they've got old Corcoran with 'em—he'd give a year's salary to get something on me. Quick, Billy, and we'll fool them yet."

Wayne was now no less eager than she to avoid being seen. If the Brennon woman knew of the secret passage, and the whole bunch was gone, then that must be also where Zaida had so mysteriously disappeared.

She was undoubtedly again in their clutches, and being spirited away to an unknown fate. All his love and devotion impelled him to follow.

Never before had the girl been in such dire peril as now, for in their desperate effort at escape the three fugitives would hesitate at nothing to conceal their trail. If they had made her a prisoner at the head of the stairs, then it was not unlikely they had overheard scraps of his conversation with Dora.

Even if they failed to recognize him, what he had said would render the danger of discovery more imminent. They were already in the shadow of the noose, and they would not dare to leave the girl alive.

The rabble was storming up the first flight of stairs. Wayne had a swift glance over the rail, catching a glimpse of several police uniforms in advance, and a motley collection following.

They would ransack the place from garret to cellar, but the birds they sought were already flown, snuggled away in their holes, waiting a chance to crawl out again. These thoughts had barely time to flash across his mind,

as the girl hustled him into the room at the head of the stairs.

There was scarcely light enough to see, but she made no effort to close the door behind them, springing swiftly forward to where a large chiffonier stood against the further wall. What secret spring she found he never knew, but the heavy piece of furniture swung silently outward, revealing the blackness of an opening beyond.

"Here, take my hand; it's only a step," she whispered. "They'll not be long down on that first floor."

"Where does this go? Into the next building?"

"Yes; it's vacant, all but the first two stories—there is nothing to stumble over."

The chiffonier rolled silently back into place again behind them, closing with a faint click. The last sound heard was a rough voice ordering the patrolmen to try each door; then they were plunged into dense, dark silence. Wayne's heart throbbed, and he could realize the excitement of the girl from her quick breathing.

"That was a narrow squeak, Billy," she said, evidently enjoying it, nevertheless. "It will puzzle those ginks where I made a getaway so sudden."

"That was some scheme," he admitted in admiration.

"Well, it works all right. We've been raided a dozen times, and nothing doing. They never have got the goods on us.

"Once a guy even moved the bureau, but never saw a thing behind it. I was there and watched him; it was good fun. Do you hear anything?"

"No, you couldn't, could you?"

"Not through that wall; I mean the other way. Likely they have gone on into the big room. Let's move along quietly until we see how they are fixed,"

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"I can't see."

"No more can I. Just keep one hand on the wall."

"Do you suppose they've got the girl along with them?"

"What girl? Oh! Grayson! I'd completely forgotten her."

She stopped with a light laugh.

"I wonder if they have. Say, how do you suppose that fellow got killed? He never fell out of that window by accident; he couldn't, for there is an iron platform in front. Somebody croaked him. Cowan, most likely."

"Why Cowan?"

"Because he's big enough to have hoisted Almerido over the rail. The girl never could have done it. There must have been some row between them after I left."

The passage was short and narrow, and ended in a wide hallway. Then, for the first time, they saw a gleam of light, and Dora stopped with an exclamation.

"The idiots! What did they light up at this hour for? If Maloney saw that he'd be up on the run. Let me douse that glim.

"Billy, there is no reason why that gang should see you. I'll be back."

He slipped along after her, creeping closer as she entered, eager to overhear every word exchanged between them. He was there to locate Zaida Grayson, to discover what had befallen her, and nothing else obscured that purpose.

The door closed in his face, but he was instantly at the keyhole listening intently. The key was in the lock, and he could see nothing, but the sound of voices from

within reached him clearly. Her abrupt entrance had evidently startled those present, but the girl was too angry to restrain her speech.

"What have you got the light for, Cowan?" she demanded. "Signaling the fly-cops? Say, you have the brains of a gnat—put it out, you."

No one moved, but Nell Brennon answered, in no pleasant tone:

"What are you beefing about? Take a look at the window, will you? There ain't no stray light goin' to get out through those blankets. What do yuh want us to do—sit here in the dark till mornin'? Not on your life, we don't."

"Well," Dora spoke sarcastically, "you're none of you so pretty to look at."

"Oh, ain't we? Now I'd like to ask you something, if you don't mind. Who is the guy you had on the stairs with you an hour ago?"

"What is it to you?"

"Seein' you ask me, it's this: I heard a bit of what you was whisperin' to him, and it didn't sound good to me. What's the graft, you cat?"

"Makin' a getaway while the goin' is good? Come, now, if you don't want your eyes scratched out, who was the guy you was givin' this dope to?"

Wayne was aware that Dora had backed against the door, and in imagination could picture the scene within. Yet her voice gave no evidence of fear—only scorn.

"Aw, Brennon, shut up!" she said sharply. "I'm in this affair as deep as any of you, ain't I? If it's a fight you are looking for, you can have it."

"I won't tell you who I was talking with, only he's

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no service man—the lad's as fly as any of us, and is here hiding out. More'n that, he's a friend o' mine, and all I told him won't hurt nobody.

"What was you doing, I'd like to know—spying on me?"

"No, I wasn't," replied Nell Brennon, indignant at the charge, and not convinced. "I was coming down to get a key to Almerido's room. It was locked, and nobody would answer when I rapped.

"Then, all at once, I run into Grayson, crouched behind the rail listening to you two talking down on the stairs. She never heard nothing behind her until I had a gat at her ear, and backed her away down the hall.

"Oh, la-la! she was scared. But not a word did I get out of her. Neither could Dave; the little devil wouldn't say how she got away, or what she was doin' down there, listenin' to you two. We was still at her when the buzzer went off."

"Where is the girl now?"

"Oh, we brought her along, of course; left her tied up in that first room, you know, where I hid out before. So your friend is a gun, is he?"

"Sure, I don't talk without knowing who I talk to."

"Where's he from? This burg?"

"No, New York; he's the real thing."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it. I couldn't hang around there long for fear Grayson might let out a yell.

"What happened, anyway? What did they sound the buzzer for—a raid?"

"Yes," the voice lower and more confident as Dora realized that the Brennon woman had overheard nothing serious. "Almerido is dead."

"Dead? The Mex? Did she do it?"

"How do I know! He was flung out of the window, over the rail of the fire-escape. It doesn't seem to me any woman could have done that job.

"The patrolman stumbled over his body in the alley, and the boys went out and brought it into the saloon. All I know is that he's dead, and there ain't a wound on him."

"And they're searchin' the place?"

"Sure. Maloney called up the central office. That's when I set off the buzzer. They're going through the rooms over there now; I got across just ahead of the gang climbing the stairs."

There was a moment of silence; then Cowan's voice growled hoarsely:

"Well, this beats hell—the whole thing's gone to pot!"

"Maybe not," snapped Nell Brennon. "Let's figure it all out first. Sit down, Dora, we're safe enough here. Dave's a coward, but I've been in worse boxes than this, and got out.

"First of all, let's get the story straight, and then we'll make that fool girl talk. Long as the cops don't get hands on her, they haven't any call to pinch us—have they? We didn't kill the Mex; that's a cinch; and I happen to know he never had a paper on him about Cullom."

"You know? How do you know?"

"'Cause they're tucked away in a safe-deposit box, and I've got the key; that's how. If we'll keep dark and use our heads we ain't beat out of that pile yet by a long ways."

CHAPTER XXVII

AGAIN FOUND

The voices within became low-spoken, as though the conspirators had gathered closer together. The Brennon woman seemed to be doing most of the talking, but Wayne could only distinguish an occasional word from her lips.

Whenever Cowan broke in he could be heard, but his questions merely served to convince the listener of a new scheme on foot, with the dead Almerido completely eliminated. Their main purpose now was evidently to remain quiet until the murder of the Mexican was forgotten, safely guarding their prisoner, in the belief that, with all necessary papers still in their possession and no suspicions aroused, the original plans could yet be carried out successfully.

And why not? What, from their point of view, would prevent? The police had no proof, no way of connecting Almerido's plunge with the Cullom affair; indeed, so far as the department was concerned, there was no Cullom affair.

The coroner's jury had decided that the wealthy manufacturer had died a natural death, due to excitement, and a fall. So far as the conspirators knew, no suspicion of foul play had been aroused. All they had to do apparently was to present their proofs in the proper form at the proper time and take possession of the estate.

Who could question their right, except the real Zaida

Grayson? Absolutely no one. Wayne was believed to be dead, and as to that other fellow—the one caught snooping about the Hartigan place—he was doubtless only an adventurous fool, glad to escape alive.

Possibly they had forgotten his very existence. So, seemingly, no real obstacle now stood between them and success. They had merely to lie low and keep their grip on the girl.

The wheels already set in motion would do the rest. Indeed, the death of Almerido gave these people a new instrument of torture. He had been alone in that room with Zaida; she alone knew how he died. They might well hope to use this fact with which to frighten the girl into signing the papers, if Dora still refused to do so.

From their present standpoint, the situation was even better than before, and the reward greater. All the money to be obtained was now theirs—the Mexican was out of it.

Wayne absorbed just enough of what was being said to grasp these points. Moreover, Dora was not talking to these people in the same remorseful spirit with which she had made her confession to him an hour before.

Possibly she felt it best to deceive; to appear to coincide with their decision, but Wayne suspected that the death of Almerido had made a difference in the girl's viewpoint. She felt safer from discovery, more willing to go on with her part in this crime.

It had only been personal fear which had led her to confide in him her knowledge of the murder of Cullom. Now her confidence had returned and she was again at heart an outlaw. This turn of things once more left him to act—alone—and that must be done before any chance encounter with those others should reveal his identity.

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Where was it the Brennon woman had said they had left the captive? In that first room! those were her words. That must mean the first after crossing into this building, for they had all come through the same secret opening.

He had no recollection of having passed any door as they groped their way forward through the darkness, yet doubtless there was one, and he must find it immediately, before Dora rejoined him.

With this in mind he stole silently back down the dim hall to the mouth of the passage, and began to explore, feeling his way in the darkness with extended hands. This was evidently a branch hallway, part of the original construction of the building, and not a mere artificial passage made to connect with the tunnel.

The fact that it was plastered seemed evidence that its presence had merely been utilized, when it was later found necessary to construct a connection between the two floors.

He had probed the darkness only a few feet when he came to a door on the left. It refused to yield to his hand upon the knob, but the key had been left in the lock, and a moment later he pressed it open, endeavoring to obtain some sense of what might be within.

All was black and silent at first, and he stepped cautiously across the threshold, keeping his hand on the side wall as he peered anxiously about, listening for the slightest movement. There was no stir, no sound, not even faint breathing to show the presence of another. He had closed the door behind him as a precaution against discovery, but was convinced already that this was not the room sought.

Yet as he stood there, undecided, hesitating as to his

next step, a light suddenly flashed through an uncurtained window directly opposite, its faint reflection serving to illuminate the entire apartment.

At first he stared at this in amazement. The light came from across an opening between the two buildings, streaming forth from an opposite window; his eyes distinguished this fact, and he even saw a man over there, moving back and forth; and then, just as unexpectedly, the fellow's arm uplifted, and he turned off the light, leaving Wayne staring once more into utter blackness.

It was all more a dream than a reality—that quick flash, the strange appearance of that moving figure in the glare, its immediate disappearance. Yet in that instant of illumination he had unconsciously seen the apartment in which he stood, realizing that it was unusually large, unfurnished, with high ceiling, and a large fireplace at his right, topped with a marble mantel.

He half imagined there was a lamp there, but could not be sure, and over beyond something dark and shapeless lay bundled on the floor. This vision came back to him as he stood irresolute—haunted him, and he began to feel his way along the wall in that direction.

If that was a lamp it would be of value; anyway, he possessed matches and a determination to learn what that other shapeless object could be.

His groping foot struck against an iron poker, which gave forth a sharp, metallic sound. This still rang in his ears when a voice spoke.

“Who are you? What is it you want here?”

He gave vent to an eager cry of recognition, so startled as to be unable to restrain himself.

“Zaida! I have found you then! Speak again—where are you?”

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"Here, just beyond the fireplace," her voice broke tremulously. "Oh, how you frightened me!"

"Did I, little girl? No wonder, creeping in as I did. You did not see me as the light flashed?"

"Only your outline; I am tightly bound, and can scarcely move—here are my hands; please cut those cords; they hurt terribly."

He came to her on hands and knees, smothering an oath on his lips, as by the sense of touch he realized her condition and hastened the work of release.

"You have surely not been lying here like this?"

"Oh, it has seemed interminable; the darkness, the pain, the uncertainty. I can scarcely tell when it happened."

"Not more than half an hour ago, surely," he assured her. "There, your arms are free; now for the feet. It was a brute who did this job—who was it?"

"Cowan and Groggin tied me, but Nell Brennon stood by, and made them do it like that. She is a devil incarnate—but—but she got nothing out of me.

"Oh, that feels good! My hands and feet are as numb as if they were dead. No, not yet, please, I couldn't stand—please let me rest here just a moment."

"Of course I will; then I will carry you, for we must get out of here quickly. What was it she tried to learn?"

"How I got away from Almerido, and who you were. I never answered a word, and it made her wild. She acted like a fiend!"

"But how did it all happen? She took you by surprise?"

"I—I was listening to you talk to that woman. I—I was not angry at what you said, for I knew why you

spoke to her in that way; but—but I couldn't help listening. That was why I never knew any one was behind me, until she thrust the muzzle of a revolver against my head.

"I—I didn't dare cry out, and—and she never said a word; only her eyes were hateful, and she motioned me to go up-stairs. I don't think I really knew what I did do, but she shoved me into a room and woke up the two men—"

"Cowan and Groggin?"

"Yes; they were both asleep, and cross as bears; they'd been drinking. She left me with them and rushed out to find out what had happened to Almerido.

"She couldn't get into his room, and came back savage. Then they tried to make me talk; they were terribly ugly about it."

"But you didn't?"

"No; I thought they'd kill me, but—but I stood it. I—I thought you might get away if I kept still. Cowan even had a knife at my throat when a buzzer rang.

"It must have been a danger-signal, for it frightened them half to death. The Brennon woman seemed to be the only one who knew what to do. She made them bind me and tie a handkerchief over my face; then they dragged me out into the hall.

"After that I don't know exactly what happened. We went somewhere, stopped and then went on again, until they threw me down here. I heard talk, and Groggin untied the handkerchief so I could breathe, but it was all dark.

"The next I knew I was alone; I heard the door shut. Where am I now?"

"In the next building south. There is a secret passage

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connecting the two, arranged for just such a purpose as this. Nell knew about it, as she hid out here once before."

"Who told you? That Dora Hooligan?"

"Yes, she brought me here with her. The police found Almerido's body in the alley and are searching the house; that's what caused the alarm."

"But why did she bring you? I don't like her!"

Wayne laughed softly, not displeased at the girl's indignation.

"Don't worry about that, Zaida," he said gently; "neither do I; she is a cat. But surely you understand why I was nice to her—I told you up-stairs what might be necessary if we met; I had to win a confession from her."

"But—but you actually made believe you loved her!"

"Oh, hardly so bad as that," he protested. "You see, I had to pretend some interest. She believes me to be a New York crook, hiding from the police; that is why she brought me here, where I couldn't be found. But the only reason I came was because of you."

"Of me! You thought I would be here?"

"I could get no trace of you in that building. Dora told me about this hide-out and that the Brennon woman knew how to get through. That settled it with me.

"I had nothing to fear from remaining there and being caught, for I knew the detective leading the raid—he's Corcoran, of the central station—but that wouldn't save you."

"But why did you believe I was again in the clutches of these people?"

"There was no other explanation of your disappearance. You could not have escaped past us unseen, and

no one else had reason to assail you. I took the chance."

He could not even perceive the outline of her figure, but he could feel the pressure of her hands.

"You came blindly then, just hoping to find me," she said softly. "You truly do care, Stuart Wayne? You have not just talked to me as you did to her?"

"Dear girl, I haven't talked to her like that at all; I have merely let her talk, and suppose. And even that was for your sake—to save you. You overheard what she said?"

"That Almerido killed my grandfather, and she saw him do it—yes. But now that the man is dead, what will she do, and say? Do you believe she will even confess that to the police?"

"With the evidence of us both, she must. Yet we can only give that evidence by escaping from their control. I doubt the girl even now, and once she learns who I really am all that is lawless in her nature will come to the surface.

"In her rage she will prove to be the most dangerous one of the gang. They are laying their plans now to go on."

"After that money? Where are they?"

"In another room, just around the corner. They are more eager now than before, for, with the Mexican dead, the spoils will be larger. They think the game is safe.

"The necessary papers were not on Almerido, but in a safety-deposit box, and the Brennon woman has the key. All they need do is have these signed and then await the action of the court."

"They think I will sign them?"

"They believe you can be made to do so through fear of being charged with the Mexican's murder. They

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suppose that you were alone with him there; that you would do anything to escape such a charge."

"But if I refused still?"

"Then, in my judgment, Dora will play the part. She would do it for revenge, if nothing else.

"Don't you understand? By that time she will know who I am, and be furious; and she will hate you as much as she will me."

"But your testimony, Stuart?"

"Would never be given if I am found here with you. I would get another box-car ride, and this time probably would not come back. Can you stand up alone now?"

She did not answer, but struggled to her feet, wincing with pain, and at first clinging to him for support. At last, with an effort, she managed to stand alone.

"Oh, yes, I am sure I can walk, although I scarcely feel as if I possessed any limbs. Let me move them about a bit first, until the blood circulates. Where can we go?"

"I know no more than you," he confessed. "There is no way for us to get back. I suppose we shall have to feel our way through the darkness to a staircase, and then creep out as best we can."

"What is below, do you know?"

"A laundry; I noticed that last night; of course, it's closed at this hour."

She reached her hand out and touched him.

"Please forgive what I said," she urged regretfully. "I had no reason to doubt you; it—it was so silly of me."

"Yet I am almost glad you did, Zaida, girl; that is, that you imagined you doubted, for down in your heart

you didn't, you know. That only means that you love me."

"Does it?"

"Of course, does it not?"

She was in his arms, even as he questioned, willingly, gladly, her lips meeting his.

"Does it not, dear?"

"Yes, Stuart, it means all that—and more."

He led her forward. They could not even be certain, dark as it was, in which direction the door lay, and Wayne was compelled to find his course by reaching out with one hand and touching the wall.

Scarcely had the two thus advanced a yard, when they were halted by a noise in the passage without; the shuffling of feet, and then a voice speaking.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LAST STRUGGLE

The voice, gruff and ominous, was undoubtedly Cowan's.

"Why didn't some one bring a light?"

"There is a lamp inside, if we need one," retorted Nell Brennon sharply. "What are you snarling about, Dave? Bumped your head?"

"No, but I can't find the darned door; it must be here somewhere. Who's that pushing past me?"

"Dora—I'll find it for you; it's farther along."

"Maybe it is. Say, where's that dove of yours gone? He ain't out here nowhar."

"I don't know," indifferently; "asleep probably. Here we are. Now, let's see what Miss Pretty-face has to tell us. Go on in, Dave; it's your play."

"Yes, and she'll talk this time, or get smashed," he growled savagely. "I'm through with the soft stuff, let me tell you."

The two, waiting and listening breathlessly, realizing instantly the utter futility of flight, shrank back against the wall. Wayne thrust the startled girl behind him, with swift determination to defend her with his life. He possessed no weapon, nothing but his bare hands, but the very sound of that ruffian's voice maddened him for the defense.

Cowan was in ugly humor, half drunk, probably, and

ready to vent his bestial cruelty on the girl. Very well, but he would have a fight first; no ring contest with gloves, but a real fight, man to man. Wayne filled his lungs with a deep breath of air, his body flung forward in tense waiting.

"Get down close to the wall," he whispered softly, "and keep out of the way."

"What—what are you going to do?"

"Do! Fight, of course. That boasting brute is going to run up against the real thing when he gets in here. Lord, if we could only scrimmage it out alone and the others hold back."

They heard a hand fumbling at the lock, then the door opened, and there came the sound of several people pushing violently through the opening into the room. There was no light behind to render them visible, and only the rustle and noise of feet to indicate their location.

The intense darkness and silence seemed to halt the invasion, for the sound of movement ceased. Then the Brennon woman spoke:

"You, Grayson, where are you? Answer."

There was no response, not even the echo of a breath. Nell burst out hotly.

"Speak up, you sniveling little cry-baby, or I'll make you wish you had. You won't, hey? Go on in there, Dave! What are you afraid of—that snip?"

"Where's the lamp, Nell?"

"To the left, over the fireplace, you big cowardly brute. Follow the wall and you can't hurt yourself. What's the matter with you, anyway? Do you want me to do this job?"

"I ain't afraid o' her, it's the dark; I can't see my own hands."

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"Well, you can feel with 'em, and it ain't likely she'll bite you. You was brash enough for coming here, now go in and bring her out."

This tongue-lashing must have driven Cowan forward, for Wayne was aware that the fellow was slowly advancing toward him, his tread, cautious as it was, heavy enough to cause a slight creaking of the board floor. Eagerly the waiting man marked each shuffling step, as the blinded Cowan felt his way along the wall.

He set his teeth hard to restrain himself, his hands clinching and unclenching in the fierce desire to come to grips. The strain of uncertainty caused his body to tremble, his nerves to throb.

It was to be a death-grapple in the dark, and he wanted it to begin. The groping figure came closer; his out-thrust hand had already touched the marble mantel and was feeling through the gloom for the lamp.

It seemed to Wayne that he could reach out a hand and touch the fellow; as though his very breath fanned his face. Nell grew impatient at the delay, at the slowness with which he fumbled forward, calling sharply from the door.

"What's happened? You're the slowest freight-train I ever saw; there ain't no holes in the floor."

He paused and shot back at her:

"And I ain't no owl, neither. I can't find the lamp. Where in thunder did you say it was?"

"Oh, shut up, Dave," interposed Dora. "You make me tired; it's there on the farther end. Strike a match, you big idiot."

Cowan grunted and swore, as though the suggestion was a new one. Wayne standing upright and tense, every muscle strained for the coming combat, heard him

fumbling in his pockets; then there was the sound of a scratch and a tiny flame sent a sudden yellow glow into the fellow's countenance.

It became stronger, and Cowan straightened up, seeking the lamp, and there, directly in front of him, illumined by the flames, with eyes of defiance glaring into his own, he saw the face of—the man he had killed!

He stared in terror at this apparition, unable to speak or move, the fire creeping up the match until it scorched his finger. With a cry of pain he dropped the charred end, which died out in a red glow on the floor as the frightened man leaped backward, driven by a terror he could not control.

An oath burst from his lips as he scrambled blindly through the darkness in a mad endeavor to escape from the room. He must have collided with some one, for there was an uproar, out of which there emerged an indignant woman's voice.

"What are you trying to do? Get off of me! Say, that is enough of that! Why didn't you light the lamp?"

"Did you see that?"

"See what?"

"That man's face—Wayne's! The fellow we shipped out in a box car! He—he was right there, I tell you. Not two feet from me, when I struck that match. Didn't any of you see him?"

Dora laughed scornfully.

"Course we didn't, 'cause he wasn't there. You've lost your nerve, if you ever had any. Ghosts—hell! Here you, Nell, take hold of this rabbit of yours, and keep him away from me.

"I'm going over and light that lamp, and then we'll

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see what this funny business means. Where's Groggin?"

"I'm here; what ye want?"

"Come on with me; now, then, a little light will finish up that ghost business. Got a match?"

"Sure, I never seed nuthin', did you?"

"No; only Cowan; he got nutty in the dark."

Wayne waited as the two felt their way forward. He had not anticipated the sudden fear which had assailed Cowan at glimpse of his face, but realized that he was no better off because of it.

The entire four were grouped in the doorway, making any attempt at escape impossible. There was nothing to do but await the revelation of his real presence in the glow of the lighted lamp.

Indeed his situation now was even more difficult, for he could not attack the advancing woman in the dark; he was not yet assured as to which side she was on—whether he was to hold her as friend or enemy.

How would she feel, how would she act when she realized his true identity? A moment more would decide this.

The match, shaded by Groggin's big hands, flared up and touched the wick of the lamp. The girl pressed the chimney down into place, and whirled swiftly about. The room was flooded with light and the two parties confronted each other silently.

Wayne, not taken by surprise, stood alertly poised in front of his companion, wondering, but ready. Cowan and Nell were just within the closed door staring toward him, as though at a vision. Groggin had shrunk back against the wall, with hands flung out before him, but Dora took one glance, and burst into laughter.

"So this was your ghost, Dave?" she cried. "A good, healthy one, I admit. What kind of a low-down trick is this, Billy? This your idea of fun? Come on, Cowan, and get your girl."

He hesitated, growling to himself, but Nell found voice.

"What do yer call him?" she asked pointing. "Do you mean to say you know the fellow?"

"Know him! Well, rather; he's my friend I told you about; this is one of his little jokes, I suppose. Anyhow, he's no ghost; you can bet your life on that."

"I don't say he is," and the rising anger in Brennan's voice evidenced the disappearance of fright. "He's real enough, but how the devil did he get in here?"

"Do you mean to say you brought him, you little cat? Billy, be darned! Say, who do you think this guy is?"

Dora stared in surprise from the face of the man into that of the infuriated woman.

"Who? Well, I'll tell you if you must know. His name is Burke, and he's from New York. Maybe you've heard of him—Billy Burke. He's one of the big ones."

"Oh, is he?" sarcastically. "You're a bright one, you are, Dora Hooligan. I know who the guy is, all right; so does Dave and Groggin."

"He can't Billy Burke us, his name is Wayne, and he's sneaked in here to get that girl off," her voice rising, "and he's made a darn fool out of you!"

The change of expression on Dora's face as this truth dawned on her was not pleasant to see. But in spite of Brennan's vehemence, she was not convinced. She confronted the motionless man.

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"Is that true what she says?"

"Yes," he admitted, knowing the uselessness of further denial. "My name is Stuart Wayne."

"And you lied to me?"

"Justifiably, under the circumstances."

"You came here to help this girl get away?"

"I did, and I am here now to defend her to my last breath."

She seemed, even then, unable to grasp the full meaning of this confession; but little by little it came to her—the things she had admitted to him on the stairs, the deception which led to her confidence, the depth of interest she had displayed, the imminent danger of her position if this man ever got away.

Hate, jealousy, the fury of a woman scorned, scourged her; all that was lawless in her strange life surged to the surface and flamed upon her tongue.

"You snake!" she screamed, her eyes blazing. "I could kill you! So you have been laughing at me—the two of you! You—you spy, and that putty-faced thing."

"Well, you're not out of it yet, let me tell you! This story is going to end here. If I only had a gat, I'd settle you right now. Cowan, Groggin, hasn't either of you got a gun?"

"Then we'll take him bare-handed. You stay at the door, Nell; this guy is never to go out alive!"

"But Dora—listen."

"Don't Dora me, you sneaking liar! We've got you this time! Come on, Cowan, you big stiff, this is as much your fight as it is mine—it's the noose for all of us if he gets away. Let's have it over with."

Wayne was in a corner, the frightened girl behind him, the converging walls protecting him slightly on either

hand. He had mapped out, as well as he could, his best mode of defense, yet it was three against one, even if the Brennon woman was content to remain out of it. Dora he held now to be the most dangerous, maddened as she was with jealous anger and fear, and willing to risk anything to attain revenge and insure his silence.

Groggin might be easily attended to alone, but Cowan was a professional pug, a big burly brute, able to crush him in a bear's grip. Yet one thing was in his favor: none of them were armed, and even if they were they would not dare to fire with the police still searching in the other building.

He remembered Nell's weapon, the one with which she had overawed Zaida on the landing—perhaps she still retained it, but she would never use it except as a last resort; they meant to crush him with weight and numbers.

All right, perhaps they could do it, but there would be a real fight first. He had lost all thought of himself; he remembered only the girl crouching behind him—she must be protected at any sacrifice.

Cowan closed first with a rush like that of a mad bull.

"Get that girl, Dora," he roared, "I'm good for this duck. You haul her out o' there while Groggin and I polish off his nibs—come on you, Steve! Hit him with that poker! Hit him hard!"

No one knows what happens at such a time. There is no opportunity for thought, only for action, quick, instinctive, savage. Wayne fought at first coolly enough, every lesson of the old college training serving him amply to enable him to repel the fierce onrush of the ex-prize-fighter.

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It was give and take, but Cowan's strength did not enable him to break through Wayne's guard, or drive him from the defense. Wayne possessed the longer reach and the greater speed, yet, although he landed twice on the brutal face, once bringing blood, the huge bulk of the man held him upright, the sting of the blows only arousing the fellow to greater fury.

It was Groggin, keeping well out of range, the iron poker in his hand, who represented the greatest danger. Wayne could not keep his eyes off him, or center attention or thought on his burly opponent, knowing that if he did so, he would be instantly downed by a treacherous blow.

Again and again the fellow leaped forward and swung viciously, as Cowan endeavored to gain a grip, but each time the blow fell short as Wayne freed himself by some swift movement. Yet, in spite of every effort, the younger man gave ground, was driven from his corner and lost his initial advantage by being thus forced into the open. This change of position also exposed Zaida, giving Dora a chance to slip in behind and attack her.

The sight of this struggle turned Wayne into a fighting fury, reckless of any injury to himself. He was no longer cool, defensive, mechanical, recalling the rules of the game, but an unleashed demon, determined to kill, or be killed.

A flaming oath burst from his lips, and all the bottled hate within him surged into instant action. He leaped straight at Cowan, driving a clinched fist into the face of the burly brute, and almost with the same movement reached over the sagging shoulder and grasped the astounded Groggin.

It was a mad struggle, but before the ex-prize-fighter

had regained his demoralized senses, his assistant was on the floor, and the iron poker in the grip of the infuriated Wayne. And he used it remorselessly, swinging it straight at Cowan's head, laying open the scalp in a ghastly wound, but failing to floor the man.

The two closed. treading on the prostrate form of Groggin, swaying back and forth, the weakening giant seeking to maintain his grip, the other struggling to break free.

Wayne, dropping the iron, wrenched one hand loose, sending it in a vicious uppercut to the jaw. The two went down together, locked as in a vise, but as Cowan struck the floor, his grip relaxed, and he lay still.

Wayne struggled to his knees, dazed, yet throwing up one hand instinctively to ward off Groggin, who had gained his feet once more and picked up the iron bar. At that instant the window crashed in, splintered glass flying over them, the sound mingled with the scream of Brennon in the open door.

"There's the cops—you damned spy! Take that!"

She fired twice, and Wayne, his hand yet flung up in defense, suddenly crumpled up and plunged face downward across Cowan's body.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE COMING OF RESCUE

Twenty minutes previously a man had stepped hurriedly from the darkness of the street into the lighted area of Hooligan's saloon. Harry was still presiding over the bar, but the only other occupant of the room was a policeman in uniform, slowly patrolling back and forth across the sawdust. He surveyed the newcomer with interest, guarding the entrance to the hall.

"Well, bo," he said, "what's up? Got a date here this morning?"

"That depends, officer. Is there a raid on?"

"Where do you get that?"

"From the central office. Here, it will pay you to be civil," and the newcomer flung back his coat, displaying a detective's badge. "I heard there was a Mexican killed here. Was the fellow knifed?"

"Not a wound on him, sorr; just battered up a bit from his fall."

"You mean he dropped from a window?"

"That's about the way it looked, sorr. A patrolman stepped on the poor devil in the alley, an' reported. This here place is a murder-hole, anyhow, so the captain sent us down to look the shack over."

"I see. Is that the fellow's body lying on the table? I'll take a look at his face."

He crossed over and turned down the sheet. For a

moment the two looked down into the upturned countenance of the dead man, ghastly and yellow under the glare of light.

"Ever see the guy before, sorr?"

"Yes; I rather thought I had the dope. His name is Almerido. I wanted him for murder. Have they found any one upstairs?"

"Not as I have heard about. Was there others in his gang?"

"Four—two men and two women. One was Hooligan's daughter; I just found that out, and that's what brought me here soon as I heard of the dead Mexican. Who's up above?"

"Lieutenant Cassidy, sorr, with a couple of harness-bulls, and three or four plainclothes men. He was expectin' trouble."

"No doubt; it's always been a bad joint. Anybody from central?"

"Corcoran, sorr."

"Good; I'll go up. Any papers on this lad?"

"Only a letter in Spanish, which ain't been read yet."

Policemen stationed on each landing challenged him sharply as he went up, but he had attained the third floor before overtaking the raiding party. The lieutenant and Corcoran stood in the dimly lit hall, directing the work of the men, and the latter wheeled about at the sound of approaching steps.

"Well. I'll be darned—Dan Stiles! Say, I was just wishing you were here. This looks like it might be your case—the one you was tellin' Dermott and me about a while back. What do you know?"

"Only that Cullom was murdered, beyond doubt.

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I've had his body dug up, and I've got a warrant here. That's what took me up to central at this hour."

"Who is the warrant for?"

"Juan Almerido—that dead man downstairs."

Corcoran whistled softly.

"Say, that's hard luck. Cassidy, this is Dan Stiles, of the government secret service. So we've run into the Hartigan outfit, have we?"

"It don't seem to be very rich picking so far. We've scoured this shack from top to bottom, but every bird has flown. Who was it you had on your list, Dan?"

"Ike Hartigan, *alias* Dave Cowan; a fellow named Steve Groggin; Ike's wife, known as Nell Brennon, and Hooligan's daughter, Dora."

"Was she in it, too? Why, she was down in the bar-room when we first came in. You know the girl, Cassidy—a good looker, and smart as a steel trap."

"Sure," and Lieutenant Cassidy caressed his mustache. "She was helpin' us, an' I never thought o' pullin' her in—she's always been straight, ain't she?"

"Well, we ain't had nothing on her, but she's a little devil, just the same. What could you expect of ol' Hooligan's daughter, brought up in this dump? She never had no chance.

"Say, Stiles, what ever became o' that young feller who was nuts on the Grayson girl? What was his name?"

"Wayne, Stuart Wayne. He and the young woman are the ones I am worrying about just now. Wayne has disappeared, no one knows where; he hasn't been seen for two days.

"It is safe to say he is where the girl is, or else helpless or dead, for he is no quitter. And if that bunch was

hiding in this shack, it is likely they had the girl with them."

"But they ain't hidin' here," interrupted Cassidy. "My men have racked this place with a fine-tooth comb. What is it, sergeant?"

"Nothin', sorr, only we got clear to the roof. There's a line dangling over the edge, and likely the birds made their get-away through the building next door."

"There's some sense to that. I suppose we might as well go down, Corcoran. Would ye want a detail sent over there?"

"What's the report?"

"Always been straight, sir. A Chinese laundry on the first floor, and upper stories ain't been occupied for the last year or two. Care to look it over?"

"If we don't central will send us back. Did anybody leave a light burning in that room?"

The others turned to look where he pointed down the hall. A faint reflection of light gleamed through a partly opened door, yellowing the floor and walls. Stiles was the first to move toward it, certain in his own mind that all had been dark there an instant before.

The instinct and caution of a man-hunter led him to advance swiftly, but under cover, and he peered through the narrow space into the revealed room. There was no light there, but across from the other building, bridging the airshaft between, and reflected through both dingy windows, the glare struck full in his eyes. For a second he hardly realized what he beheld, then he flung up one hand in a sudden warning to the others.

"Corcoran!" he whispered hoarsely over his shoulder, never removing his eyes from the scene. "Come here, man, and look. There they are, the whole outfit.

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"Something is doing, but that glass is so dirty I can hardly see. What do you make of it?"

Corcoran craned his head and stared, barely able to believe his eyes.

"It's a fight," he said. "The gang has cornered the lad, and had to have a light in order to down him. Nobody thought about the window.

"Cassidy, call in your men; lively now, and we'll bag the whole kit and caboodle. You stay here, sergeant.

"Come along, Stiles, let's crawl across the room and get a fair view of what's happening over there. This beats my time!"

The two men crept across, keeping their bodies well down below the stream of light, and then cautiously elevating their heads to peer through the window. Each rubbed a hole in the grime and quickly surveyed the scene thus revealed. No sound could be heard through the two intervening walls, but a single glance gave them complete understanding.

They saw the girl in one corner, with Wayne poised before her, caught glimpses of the others, but had no time in which to note anything further before Cowan leaped forward with the rush of a mad bull. The fight was so fast and furious, so breathless and exciting that for the moment neither watcher could do aught but stare across at the swirling figures, the fierce blows struck, the leaping back and forth of men.

Stiles was first to grip himself, as Groggin treacherously attempted to assail Wayne from the rear with the deadly poker, realizing the desperate position of his friend in spite of the brave battle he was waging against odds.

"Corcoran," he whispered, "get back there quick. This is the only way we can get through.

"Knock down a bed, and bring the sideboards; they'll answer. For Heaven's sake, man, hurry up! They are four to one, and they'll get the boy!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Stay here and shoot that big brute through the glass, if necessary."

A revolver gleamed in his hand.

"It's a bad shot, but I'll take a chance, unless you are back in time.

"Great Scott! Did you see that? Wayne's got the iron now!

"Say! that lad is some scrapper. Get your men, Quick!"

Corcoran dashed back, and the sound of his voice reached Stiles, kneeling at the hole and peering anxiously across, with ready weapon gripped in his hand. Twice he lifted it to a level, tempted to fire, but each time was deterred by some swift movement of the struggle.

He had no wish to kill, but to capture, and he would use the gun only as a last resort—to save Wayne's life. Even as he hesitated, feeling that he must act, the policemen crept in through the door behind him, bearing with them the material for a rude bridge. He cast his glance back over one shoulder, and crouched down out of the way.

"Now throw up this window, Cassidy," he ordered, assuming command. "We'll have to crush our way through the opposite one to get in. Be ready now and throw the end forward far enough so it will rest firm.

"Give it a hard swing, boys and two of you follow me

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—not more than one on a board at a time; they might break. You understand?"

They looked at him and nodded, and he selected the two lighter men as his companions.

"You two stand back ready to jump. Now take hold, you others, and let her go the instant that window goes up. All right, lieutenant!"

Both Cassidy and Corcoran had hold of the sash and lifted it silently. Their hands still grasped the frame when Stiles gave the signal, and the eager men sent the narrow board crashing through the glass of the window opposite.

The end caught firmly, and had scarcely settled into place when Stiles, in advance, clambered out on the tottering surface, and made a swift rush across. Even as he wrecked sash and glass with the heavy butt of his gun to gain entrance, the Brennon woman sounded the alarm, and her revolver spoke, aimed directly at Wayne.

Stiles heard a cheer behind him and saw her vanish through the open door as Wayne reeled and fell across the outstretched body of his antagonist. With one spring he was in the center of the room, barring the escape of Dora, with gun pointed at Groggin's head.

"Stay where you are, both of you," he commanded sharply. "The jig is up. Here, lads," to the blue-coats who swarmed in after him, "take care of these two. Some of you chase that woman out in the hall. Be careful, she's armed."

He turned to the two motionless bodies, but Zaida Grayson was before him and already held Wayne's head in her lap, her fingers smoothing back his hair, revealing a bloody wound where the bullet had struck him. Stiles bent down, and laughed.

"The boy has played in luck," he said grimly, glancing into her face. "Don't worry; he's a long way from being killed. Are you Miss Grayson?"

"Yes."

"Well, my name is Dan Stiles. I am the man this bunch shanghaied in the Hartigan house. I have been on their trail ever since, but Stuart here beat me to it at last.

"Cassidy, have one of your men hunt up some water and a cloth, and then give me a hand with Cowan here; he's knocked out, but will live to be hanged yet."

"You—you have the evidence?" asked Zaida, glancing up at him.

"Well, enough for a start. All we need to complete the case is Nell Brennon.

"Ah, Nell, so you didn't get away? Frisk the lady, Corcoran; she has somewhere on her person a safety-deposit key I need very much.

"Thanks; no doubt this is the article. Call a patrol-wagon, lieutenant."

Wayne's eyes slowly opened, and he struggled to rise, his confused glance wandering from face to face of those gathered about him.

"They—they shot me, didn't they?" he whispered. "What—what has happened? Are you all right, Zaida, girl? Why, the police are here—Dan Stiles!"

"Yes, I'm here, old man; don't worry; it's all over with."

Wayne's uncertain glance settled on Dora, and their eyes met. There was almost a plea for forgiveness in his gaze, but she met it with an indignant shrug of the shoulders.

"Say," she said to the policeman who held his hand

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on her shoulder, "take me out o' here, or else I'm liable to croak that spy in spite of all of you."

"But nothing you said to me puts you in so bad," protested the wounded man eagerly. "If you confess the truth it gives you a chance."

"To hell with your chance. I don't squeal."

Corcoran laughed.

"What's up, Dora?" he asked, interested in this by-play. "Did the lad get your goat? Made love to you, eh?"

"Love nothin', but he got me talkin'; I thought he was one of us."

The detective's eyes were filled with humor. his memory reverting to his late conversation with Wayne.

"And you spilled? So he put it over, did he? Some nerve that. Who was it you thought you was talking to—Billy Burke?"

She made no answer, staring at him with angry eyes.

"Oh, all right, sister; you'll talk freely enough tomorrow before Bill Dermott. Take her along, Dooley; we've done a good night's work."

Wayne watched them leave the room, resting back against Zaida, her hand tightly clasped in his own. He now understood clearly all that had occurred.

Suddenly he drew the unresisting girl closer within his arms and kissed her.

"Now that it is all over, are you sure you have nothing to regret, dear—no desire to retract your promise?"

"No, Stuart."

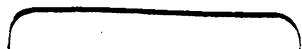
"You really love me?"

"With all my heart."

THE END



JUN 3 1938



the 1990s, the number of people in the UK who are employed in the public sector has increased by 1.5 million, from 2.5 million in 1980 to 4 million in 1995. The public sector has become a major employer in the UK, and its growth has been a major factor in the overall growth of the economy.

The public sector has also become a major provider of social services, and its growth has been a major factor in the overall growth of the economy. The public sector has become a major provider of social services, and its growth has been a major factor in the overall growth of the economy. The public sector has become a major provider of social services, and its growth has been a major factor in the overall growth of the economy.

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